

**Joint Land, Air and Sea Strategic Special Program**  
**AY 2018**



**WORLD SUMMARY**

# **NOTIONAL EXERCISE MATERIAL FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY JLASS-SP AY2018 WORLD SUMMARY**

## **JLASS-SP WORLD SUMMARY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This summary outlines major hypothetical political, economic, military, and social developments in the world from 23 September 2017 through 30 November 2027. While there are significant, incidental variations and deliberate alterations from real world developments, this summary is intended to reflect a plausible depiction of major trends and influences in the world regions and in specific countries.

### **DISCLAIMER**

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**The cutoff date for information used in this summary was 23 August 2017.**

**This summary provides information on world events through 30 November 2027.**

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**SECTION A: THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT**

**Introduction**

The international system has steadily transformed over the past decade, owing to the rise of new regional powers, a challenged global economy and the growing positive and negative influence of non-state actors. While gaps in national power continue to narrow between developed and developing countries and shift countries and power among nation-states, relative power of non-state actors – including businesses, tribes, religious organizations, terrorist groups, and criminal networks and super empowered individuals has increased..

Significant strategic rivalries revolve around trade, access to natural resources, investment in emerging economies, technological innovation, and acquisition. The global economic and military predominance that underwrote U.S. foreign and defense policy in the latter part of the previous century can no longer be assumed. American leverage has become constrained and limits the ability for the U.S. to act unilaterally as it had once done. As such, it has become increasingly common for state and no-state actors to form coalitions of convenience to accomplish specific ends, which often disperse when no longer needed. This form of hybrid geopolitical activity is changing the way the U.S. pursues national policy goals.

**A Shifted Global Economy**

The overall transfer of global wealth and economic power that peaked in the first decades of the 21st century – a roughly West to East shift – essentially stalled as Asian economies began to slip from increasing trade imbalances. At the same time, western economies led by Europe, stabilized and slowly regained lost industrial capacity and gradually restored their economic footing. This shift derives from two sources. First, the impact of a long-term decline in energy demand and consumption in the developed world, combined with significantly reduced oil and gas prices across the board, and technology leaps in the developing world have led to a sharp reduction in fossil fuel revenues. Secondly, an Asian economic downturn, which began in 2021 with reductions in consumption across developed Asian nations and a shift away from some industrial production due to rising labor standards, caused some industrial capacity to shift away from Asia, leaving a population of low-skill workers out of jobs and straining governments through increased social spending.

Outside of Europe and the United States, the Asian economic downturn caused many already vulnerable countries to fall further behind. Sub-Saharan Africa has remained the region most vulnerable to economic disruption, population stresses, civil conflict, and political instability. The decreased global demand for fossil fuels overall especially from the Sub-Saharan region has only served to exacerbate the situation, as most local populations are deprived of what economic benefits had existed. Profits arising from increased commodity prices have further entrenched many corrupt or otherwise ill-equipped governments, diminishing prospects for democratic and market-based reforms.

Although many of Latin America's major countries have become middle-income powers and asserted some level of regional influence, populist nations, such as Venezuela and Bolivia, have continued to lag behind in development and approach failed state status. Several Caribbean

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nations have gone through the cycle of failure and seem to be improving, but often as client states of more powerful nations, such as China, Brazil, the U.S., or non-state actors, both legitimate and criminal.

Today, the world's largest economies are, in terms of total gross domestic product (GDP), China, the United States, India, Japan, Russia, Germany, Brazil, France, Mexico and Italy as the tenth largest economy in relative purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. In general, the people of Europe, Japan, and the United States retain a significantly higher per capita income than the more populous China and India, though that gap is closing as the Asian countries' middle classes continue to grow, the populations of Western nations' age, and social spending dominates government spending.

India had enjoyed continued economic growth; however, due to the persistent effects of the 2021 recession, economic growth has lagged well behind even the downward revised official projections. Wages and salaries, consistently below western standards, have continued to decline, with approximately 39% of the Indian population remaining below the international poverty line. This has led to political discontent and increased nationalism characterized by the rise of vocal advocates clamoring for the active exertion of regional dominance.

Russia and China have chosen to continue to chart independent courses for their nations. Neither China nor Russia have followed Western liberalism for self-development, but instead are using a different model. This model, often called "state capitalism," is a loose term economists developed to describe a system of economic management that gives a prominent role to the state. Additionally, both countries have substantiated their leaders' views of political structure and human rights that continues to differ significantly from accepted Western standards. Other rising powers – India, South Korea, and Vietnam – also selectively used state capitalism to help develop their economies.

Another impact of the continued low oil prices has been in the reduction of sovereign wealth funds within the Middle East. While Iran has used its reentry into the global oil economy to improve its citizens' quality of life, the vast majority of Middle Eastern countries have decreased their populations' oil dividends and reduced government subsidies and services. This reduction stems directly from the evaporation of sovereign wealth funds with some countries barely able to balance their national budgets, a first in modern history. This reversal of fortune has created a population wide ill will towards the long reigning ruling families of the region.

#### **A Globalized World**

Despite the significant economic problems of the past several years, globalization has continued to accelerate the pace of human interaction and continues to extend its reach. Due to quantum leaps in information technology, all but the most remote corners of the Earth are "connected" on some level. However, many have been left behind by globalization, either through the misfortunes of geography (sub-Saharan Africa), or by culture or design (North Korea). Many of these nations are weak or failing states that will require an array of international economic, diplomatic, and military resources to establish, enhance, or sustain stability. In today's globalized world of nations, many regional economic powers and organizations are capable of providing this kind of leadership.

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The United Nations (UN) continues its struggle for relevancy. Over the past decade, two relatively strong Secretary-Generals tried to reinvigorate the UN's vision and mission with mixed results. Inability to react to the Arab Spring and its long-term ramifications across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and its protracted failures to find solutions to a number of long-term conflicts, such as Syria, Libya, Israel-Palestine, and Jammu-Kashmir, have contributed to the decline of the UN's influence. Presently, the UN remains a weak organization politically with its major accomplishments primarily in the public health, human rights and education arenas. The UN Security Council continues to be composed of the five permanent members – China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States – and ten rotating non-permanent member seats. Currently those are (with term ends):

Estonia (2029)	Peru (2028)	Turkey (2028)	Vietnam (2029)	DRC (2029)
Honduras (2028)	Qatar (2028)	Uganda (2028)	Morocco (2029)	New Zealand (2029)

### Population and Migration Trends

Over the course of the last decade, the world continued to add approximately 60 million people per year, reaching an estimated 8.1 billion by January 2025. Over 90% of that increase came in developing countries, where the combination of demographics and economy permitted populations to grow, but made meeting rising expectations difficult as that growth typically grew the lower classes. In contrast, population growth in the developed world slowed and in some cases even declined. In particular, Japan's population declined by at least at 2.6%, and while Russia saw slight gains in 2013 and 2014 after decades of decline, those gains began to reverse in 2015 and have trended downward ever since. Over the past 10 years, the Russian population has declined from 142 million to the present population of just under 137 million.

China has seen its workforce decrease since 2021 due to an aging population, which has only exacerbated its economic struggles. The United States is a partial exception to this trend due to higher birth rates and continued high levels of immigration. Declining population growth rates affected the willingness of European societies to bear the human costs involved in the use of military force. Conversely, regions, such as the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, where the youth bulge has reached over 50% of the population, possess fewer inhibitions about engaging in conflict. The migration trends seen at the beginning of the 21st century, and the immigrant crisis that exploded in 2015 and 2016, tested the veracity of the European Union concept. While these trends have continued, with Middle Easterners and North Africans fleeing continued chaos to resettle in other nations, the EU has been relatively successful in stemming the tide of illegal migration and significantly curtailed legal immigration. In other parts of the world, Moscow's failure to stem the increased flow of illegal Chinese immigrants into eastern Siberia has changed the demographics in that sparsely populated region of Russia. Despite increased border control efforts, Latin Americans continue to pass illegally into the United States and Canada. In addition, citizens of the Philippines, Pakistan, and India continue to provide the bulk of the labor force for Arabian Gulf State economies.

### Demand for Natural Resources

Resource issues continue to be prominent on the international agenda. Global economic and population growth, as well as concentration in cities, has put pressure on a number of strategic

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resources – including strategic minerals, food, and water, outstripping available supplies in some regions.

The increased extraction of fossil fuels (and greater efficiency in consumption) over the past decade has allowed energy prices to remain significantly lower compared to the previous decade. Included in this is the continued refinement and streamlining of North American oil and natural gas extraction technology and methods, which, along with subsidies, has allowed for relatively profitable operations regardless of persistently lower wholesale prices. The termination of congressionally mandated export limitations helped the U.S. industry. This strategy has kept the per-barrel price so low that an increasingly large number of smaller U.S. fracking operations closed reducing U.S. energy resources on the open market.

Of course, the price of energy products remains vulnerable to situations and events outside of market control, creating possibilities for costs to jump somewhat higher; however, the diversity of sources has helped minimize that possibility. Even so, one or more of the following can affect price, availability and distribution of fossil fuels:

- Territorial and sovereignty disputes, such as within the South and East China Seas and other regions
- Natural disasters and terrorist acts that affect energy production and distribution
- Lack of security and stability within certain energy producing nations
- Use of energy as a national tool to achieve foreign policy objectives.

Climate change has exacerbated other resource scarcities. Food and water are now strategic resources. Increased demand for food, in part due to limited distribution ability to populations in rural Africa and Latin America, has caused steady inflation in global food prices despite reasonably sufficient supply. Lack of access to stable supplies of water is at the point of crisis, particularly for agricultural purposes, and the problem will worsen because of rapid urbanization. Today, experts consider over 2.9 billion people (36% of the world's population) water or cropland stressed. Although the impact varies by region, many areas have suffered water scarcity and loss of agricultural production. Declines in production have been disproportionately concentrated in developing countries. Water stress in the face of rising demand, inability to implement water management practices, and shifting priorities for unskilled labor will sharpen competition between urban and rural areas, between neighboring provinces, and between nations.

Throughout the first two decades of this century, debate about the long-term prospects of Arctic economic development and security centered on territorial claims and the long-term effect of global climate change on the seasonal accessibility of the Arctic. The key players in the Arctic Region have been those countries with territorial claims above the Arctic Circle: the United States, Russia, Canada, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. These eight countries form the Arctic Council, established by the Ottawa Declaration of 1996 as a high-level inter-governmental forum to provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination, and interaction among the Arctic States to focus on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection. China, though geographically not an Arctic nation, has been persistent in its quest for a seat on the council; however, they remain just one of the 12 Arctic Council Observer nations.

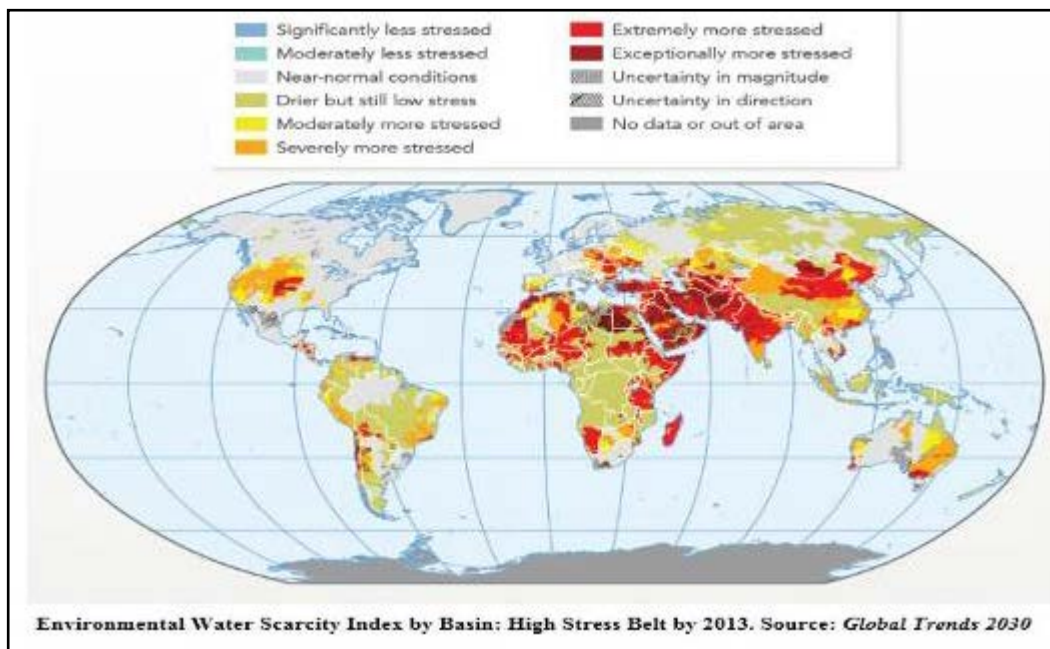
The Arctic ice pack continued to show shrinkage from 2016 through the present, the rate of which has seemed to increase beyond scientific predictions. This reality has quickened the

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advance of Arctic exploration, specifically by the Russian Federation, whose continental shelf claim was partially verified by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) tribunal in 2018. This decision extended Russia's Arctic territory to within 200NM of the North Pole, placing the pole within the Russian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). However, the UN restricted the territory to the narrow expanse of the Lomonosov Ridge as the UN defined it, rejecting the much wider claim that Moscow had sought. The Russian claim would have significantly expanded their Arctic territory between the ridge and the edge of the Arctic area under U.S. domain.

Over the past ten years, Russia has paired a commercial "Arctic Class" shipbuilding program with the development of additional naval ports along their northern coast. Both efforts ensure emplacement of adequate communication and search and rescue assets to secure the shorter polar routes for cargo and energy shipments during the summer season. Since 2016, Russia has added six new icebreakers, expanding that fleet to 47 ships, in addition to expanding their North Sea Fleet and its homeport facilities at Murmansk. Canada, and especially the United States, have both lagged badly in their parallel efforts in this area. The United States has added only two new icebreakers, and these are the only ones currently in service, as the Alex Haley is currently in overhaul for service-life extension.



The new commercial fleets under design and development will possess the capability to transit the northern sea route unescorted during the summer months and in icebreaker-escorted convoys in the spring and fall months. The expectation is that the first of these ships will begin making runs between northern Russian oil terminals and China in 2028. Various environmental and non-governmental watchdog agencies have expressed concern over the impact of the increase in Arctic human activities.

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#### **Terrorism**

Terrorism remains a major transnational problem as terrorist groups have continued to feed on enduring ethnic, religious, nationalist, separatist, political, and economic motivations. They continue to adopt competencies similar to transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) though linkages between terrorist and TCOs remain limited. Terrorist groups with disparate or even opposing aims have increasingly begun to cooperate as a matter of occasional convenience to pool resources or accomplish a temporary shared goal.

A handful of extremist terrorist groups with a truly global reach have remained relevant threats to the United States and its partners around the world. In the weakest countries, terrorist groups have sought to control government institutions and/or territory. At the same time, there is a continuing trend away from state-supported political terrorism and toward more diverse, adaptive, transnational networks enabled by information technology.

Terrorist groups have increasingly employed advances in communications technologies to facilitate their operations, create sophisticated weapons, and develop innovative techniques to improve the likelihood of successful attacks. The use of drones by terrorist organizations has become commonplace for surveillance, attack, and review of their own activities. The use of GPS technology and commercial satellite imagery, first reported during the 2008 Mumbai attacks by Lashkar e Taiba, has subsequently become a standard tool for terrorist organizations. Commercially available and “crowd-sourced” encryption and steganography technologies have also empowered terrorists, making their communications virtually indecipherable and extremely difficult to detect.

Increasingly, cyberspace has become a domain for international terrorist organizations, other non-state actors and those nations seeking asymmetric advantage. The internet has pushed into every corner of the planet, enabling groups like Anonymous and Zbellion to use the cyber world to spread a call for anarchy, distribute instructions and training, and conduct targeting. Terrorist financing also assumed a much more sophistication via the internet. Identity thieves and black-hat hackers have enabled terrorists to raise funds through methods that are often unrecognizable to law enforcement agencies.

Additionally, over the past ten years, there has been a surge in the anti-globalization movement, with extreme elements of the movement morphing into terrorist organizations. These organizations pose credible threats to capitalist societies, particularly the United States. The most dangerous and dominant global group with this philosophy is the People’s Armed Liberation (PAL) organization. PAL has combined their anti-globalization agenda with a Marxist-style socialist philosophy to appeal to a broader demographic of recruits worldwide.

#### *Significant Global Terrorist Organizations*

##### **People’s Armed Liberation (PAL)**

An American named Otto Cyre established the concept for PAL in 2017. Cyre’s vision for PAL was to create an organization to defeat globalism and capitalism throughout the world by rallying the proletariat to orchestrate the overthrow of capitalist governments and global conglomerates. PAL differs significantly from socialist terrorist organizations of the past like the Red Brigade. PAL is multi-ethnic, with its base membership representing most of the globe’s ethnicities and cultures. Further, because this group emerged during the net-centric age, its members are



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extremely skilled at marketing their agenda, fundraising, and recruiting within the cyber domain. This organization may have a handful of physical operation cells, but their primary cell organization is in the cyberspace realm.

Over the past five years, PAL has become adept at conducting cyber-attacks against global conglomerates. They have been so successful that the combined efforts of global cyber security teams and law enforcement agencies have been unable to track down the identities of the attackers or determine an exact location from where the attacks originated. Analysts assess that PAL consists of 10,000-20,000 members, with each member's level of commitment to the cause unknown. Analysts believe that financing for PAL comes from illegal cyber-siphoning of funds from large global corporations, banks, and capitalist governments around the world. PAL also receives funds from aiding illegal activity and solicits internet donations from those sympathetic to their cause.

#### **Al Ttariq Alwahid**

On 1 February 2019, Boko Haram (BH) publicly declared its separation from and ended all affiliations with Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As a result of this split, BH renamed itself Al Ttariq Alwahid (ATA), which is translated in English as "The Only Way." The ATA has succeeded AQ and ISIS as a third generation transnational terrorist organization. AQ was initially successful in conducting large-scale attacks against Western targets and ISIS was temporarily able to dominate large geographical territories; the ATA aspires to do both. Founded as a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist sect in West Africa, the ATA learned from the successes and failures of its predecessors to develop into a hybrid version with substantial information and economic resources with competent military capabilities. The ATA remains pragmatic in their approach and exploits ungoverned areas in an attempt to create political legitimacy.

ATA acquired the majority of its initial assets because of the power vacuum created by the ISIS departure from Africa. As a result, ATA quickly stockpiled regional prominence, wealth, and power that led to the attainment of maritime assets and diamonds from portions of the African continent. ATA developed limited organizational partnerships, which allowed it to grow its military capabilities and influence in the region, as well as areas rich in developed oil and mineral industries built by Chinese and Western companies.

The leader of ATA, Abubakar Shekau, subsequently released a message declaring the ATA split from all other organizations over racial differences among ATA members, and remains primarily composed of Africans incensed by derogatory statements from AQ and ISIS leaders who claimed that Arabs were the superior and chosen Muslims of Allah. Shekau continued to leverage this racial divide to successfully recruit more black Africans to the ATA ranks. Senior ATA leadership believes it is now time for the black African Muslims to employ all necessary tactics to advance their agenda.

Known for using oppressive means, ATA plans to employ its increasing resources, in concert with Sharia Law, over the course of the next several years to unify a significant portion of Africa that stretches from Nigeria to the Horn of Africa (HOA). A youth bulge has allowed the ATA to recruit from a disproportionately large population of disadvantaged youth with bleak employment opportunities and increasing limited resources threatening the survival of populations. Senior ATA leadership believes the effect of this boom provides a strategic

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advantage to ATA as it competes for global prominence with the Arab Muslim threats posed by AQ and ISIS. The resulting effect potentially solidifies ATA as the preeminent Islamic organization.

Over the past five years, ATA professionalized piracy operations in the Gulf of Guinea that further facilitated expansionist aspirations in Africa. The ATA aspires to grow that capability in the HOA to disrupt Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in Bab-el-Mandeb.

The Liberian Ebola outbreak was successfully contained in 2014-2015, but ATA quietly recruited Islamic sympathizers and the requisite scientific expertise from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) deployed to Africa during that epidemic and may now possess the necessary components for an Ebola dirty bomb, but still require technological support to successfully deploy it on a large scale. Additionally, ATA has threatened to fly Ebola infected people through international airports in Seoul, Tokyo, London, Paris, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

ATA is currently active in recruiting members from the African diaspora in Europe and the United States. It is unclear if ATA will seek to establish permanent enclaves here to threaten local national governments, but it seems likely that it will recruit members in these locations for terrorist operations (if required) and to raise financial backing.

#### **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**

Long categorized as part of a strictly domestic insurgency against Algeria's military government, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claims to be the local franchise operation for AQ. Originally, its aims included the overthrow of Algeria's secular military government and the reestablishment of an Islamic Caliphate. However, the group's integration into the global AQ structure indicates a shift to take up the banner of global jihad and collude on future attacks in North Africa, Western Europe, and the United States.

From 2010 through late 2012, AQIM pushed strongly in Mali, eventually controlling most of the northern part of the country including the towns of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal and threatening the southern population centers and central government. In December 2013, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2085 (UNSCR 2085), and in April 2014 UNSCR 2100, which authorized formation and deployment of a UN peacekeeping force known as the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In January 2014, before MINUSMA was organized, AQIM and other rebel forces made a strong push southward, prompting the Malian government in Bamako to request immediate French assistance.

Throughout 2014 and into 2015, OPERATION SERVAL combined military operations by France, Algeria, Morocco, Mali, and Mauritania, was successful in clearing out many AQIM enclaves. Operations wound down in July 2015 and transitioned to OPERATION BARKHANE, a 3,000 strong French-led enduring counter-terrorism effort headquartered in Chad, but spread across Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. This forced AQIM to consolidate its operations into the border area shared by Algeria, Mali, and Mauritania.

AQIM entered a period of rebuilding, refraining from large-scale operations, in order to recover from 3 years of tactical setbacks. During this "operational pause" the AQIM leadership worked to gain the allegiance of, or guarantees of neutrality from, local tribes which allowed AQIM

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leadership the time and space needed to rebuild not only their forces, but also to reestablish the extent of their reach.

The death of Osama bin Laden, followed by that of al-Zawahiri in 2018, created a void in senior AQ leadership that regional warlords in the Afghan-Pakistani tribal areas quickly exploited. As they were more interested in consolidating control over regional narco-trafficking than attracting the attention of international and U.S. anti-terrorist efforts, their support for AQ began to be seen as “bad for business” and eventually waned. The remaining leaders of AQ were able to make their way through southern Somalia into northern Mali where they joined forces with AQIM.

In 2019, a refocused AQIM began to expand their presence in northern Mauritania. With the acquiescence of local tribes, they established a growing number of training bases within the province of Tiris Zemmour. By 2022, AQIM’s presence extended throughout the Maghreb, with members in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The number of members was conservatively estimated at 38,000 in 2022 and reports increasingly indicate that AQIM now has bases in Western Sahara. Guelta Zemmur serves as their western base, with additional camps established to the south within the central hills.

AQIM has concentrated its efforts over the past ten years at leveraging cooperation between the major terrorist and insurgent groups in Africa. It has become increasingly evident that AQIM, building on networks formed in the past by al Shabaab, has developed a sophisticated network across the African continent and beyond. The two groups began sharing funding, training methods and material sources in order to unify their efforts to establish Islamic regimes in their respective regions. This cooperation has now developed into a complex and well-coordinated network that presents a legitimate threat across Northern and Central Africa.

Since 2023, AQIM has sought global effect, as evidenced by the May 2024 bombings of the New York and New Jersey entrances to the Lincoln Tunnel. This attack killed over 400 people and prompted the United States to launch Operation DESERT STRIKE – an operation to attack and destroy AQIM in Mauritania and Mali. While DESERT STRIKE has been largely successful, AQIM continues to leverage civil unrest and dissatisfaction across the Maghreb to recruit and rally members, as well as to attract jihadists from across the Middle East.

#### **United Patriots Against International Government (UPAIGO)**

This group appeared in late 2021 and is believed to have been formed by radical members of PAL who were not satisfied with the latter’s progress in achieving its stated goals. Their strategy is to erode confidence in governmental and international institutional bodies by staging events that demonstrate the “impotency” of the establishment to deliver on promises of security and prosperity. Focused messaging combined with spectacular but deniable actions are hallmarks of UPAIGO activities.

Like PAL, most UPAIGO membership is from Western or other first world nations but the group has exhibited strong ties to several violent extremist groups around the globe including AQ, Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), Jemaah Islamiah (JI), Environmentalists Against Capitalists Organization (EACO), Freedom Confederation (FC), and others. These groups seem to have cooperated with UPAIGO where their agendas are similar.

PAL has primarily operated via cyberspace both inside and outside of the United States. Only on a single occasion has that group been able to generate a physical attack by using a drone-

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launched missile against a Silicon Valley office building in May of 2021. On the other hand, UPAIGO has demonstrated the consistent ability to generate physical effects both inside and outside the United States, usually through proxy organizations. Consequently, UPAIGO has been linked to a number of incidents, including:

- A November 2022 cyber-attack on the Angarsk Natural Gas Processing Facility in the Russian Federation caused a two-week shutdown, precipitating a sharp rise in the price of gas just prior to the 2022-2023 winter heating season.
- A failed attempt to bomb an international security conference among Pacific regional militaries and defense industry providers. Two executive attendees and the USPACOM Political Advisor (POLAD) were killed in the attack with dozens of others injured.
- A failed January 2024 plot to detonate a radiological dispersal device at the Philadelphia Airport. The device was designed to use medical sources and homemade explosives.
- A June 2026 attack on several aircraft leaving Shannon Airport. INLA members fired automatic weapons at the departing aircraft. Although damaged, the aircraft was still able to land successfully but caused a drop in international air travel in Europe and the Eastern U.S. for over a week.

While the leadership and organizational nature of UPAIGO is not clear, IRS agents were able to arrest Andrew Milbourne, UPAIGO's spokesperson, on tax evasion charges in September 2023. UPAIGO activities since that time have been negligible. Likewise, the relationship between UPAIGO and PAL is unclear.

#### **Advanced Science & Technology**

Although the United States maintains a scientific and technological edge on the battlefield, in space, and in precision-guided weaponry, it faces a number of competitors in these fields. The commercialization of space has given state and non-state actors greater access to high-resolution reconnaissance, weather prediction, encrypted communications, and precision navigation. Decreased cost to orbit from private spaceflight firms employed by several nations for military missions, most notably Pakistan. Further, several countries have developed counter-space technologies such as improved space-object tracking, signal jamming, and to a lesser extent, directed-energy weapons. Space-faring nations made considerable progress during the past decade on agreements for establishing cooperative measures in space. Notably, establishing a form of Law of the Sea for space operations in order to mitigate debris, reduce radio frequency interference, improve pre-launch notification, and other actions to promote transparency and increased communication. These measures achieved the desired effects to some degree for civil and commercial space operations. However, most space-capable nations likely maintain classified intelligence and offensive counter-space capabilities.

Since completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003, biotechnology developments have grown at an ever-increasing rate. Procedures that took radioactive tracers and days to complete in 2005 now take only minutes to complete. These technologies are readily available in scientific publications and developed countries continually educate students from around the world in their application, empowering a new generation with the knowledge and ability to build and equip basic bio-labs. In the United States, arrests for clandestine bio-weapon laboratories (hidden in

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basements and garages) went from an average of 20 per year in 2010 to over 200 per year in 2025. States possessing only a modest bio-medical industry are able to use the same facility that produces vaccines or pharmaceutical products as a biological weapon production facility. Advances in scientific knowledge now mean that deadly viruses such as polio and Ebola can be synthesized using public databases and available technology. The advancement and diffusion of biotechnology, nanotechnology, 3D printing, and the materials sciences have further increased the capabilities of U.S. adversaries to engage in biological warfare, bio-terrorism, and chemical warfare.

#### **Proliferation**

The United States is among the 100 nations (recent signees include China, India, and Vietnam) that actively participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to interdict the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), their precursors, and means of delivery. However, over the past decade, export control regimes and sanctions have proved less effective in the face of advanced underground proliferation marketplaces.

Entering the 2020s, earlier predictions regarding the spread and increasing sophistication of ballistic missiles have borne out. In 2026, at least 30 nations possess ballistic missiles of varying ranges. Over the past decade, these missiles have become more flexible, mobile, survivable, and accurate. The effect of these advances is making missile attacks potentially more attractive, given the possibility of controlling or limiting collateral damage in the same way the United States used cruise missiles in the past. The increased range of missiles has resulted in allowing otherwise “minor” nations true regional and cross-regional reach. Paired with a growing number of nations possessing either nuclear weapons or active nuclear research programs, ballistic missile proliferation continues to be an alarming influence in world affairs.

By comparison, those nations that entered the century with advanced weaponry have put additional effort into missile defense technologies following the 2016-17 North Korea missile tests and the 2018 Iranian demonstrations. Admitting that stopping technology transfer was failing, America, Europe, Japan, Australia, Israel, Brazil, Russia, and China significantly increased their efforts to not only track and shoot down potential threat missiles but increase their ability to target those systems through non-ballistic means (space-based directed energy weapons, electronic warfare, and cyber). These efforts have led to a sort of arms race in defensive measures with the provider nations vying for clients and forward positioning sites around the globe and several small countries developing a niche expertise and amplifying their relative strategic value.

The prospect that sophisticated weaponry, including WMD, will get into the hands of state and non-state belligerents is a significant concern. The construction of new nuclear power plants outside of Europe over the past decade has further spread access to technology capable of producing fissionable uranium or plutonium. South Africa, UAE, and Vietnam, all of whom have constructed several nuclear reactors to provide domestic power, are just such examples, making them a potential source of radiological materials.

Even a limited number of ballistic missiles in a regional crisis may hinder U.S. access or entry into a theater of operations. Limited missile strikes may challenge our ability to establish air dominance or potentially open a “second front” by putting U.S. or coalition forces “at risk” far

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from the traditional front lines of a ground conflict. In a fast-evolving crisis, U.S. and coalition missile defenses may be limited to capabilities already forward deployed (PAC-3, Patriot, THAAD). Additional Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) forces may take too much time to reach the theater to be a major factor. Consequently, commanders must assess the need for missile defense forces early in any potential crisis. Currently deployed U.S. BMD forces will handle a small raid but will come under stress in any complex missile strike scenario.

#### Asymmetric Capability and Weapons of Mass Destruction

Potential threat actors continue to pursue asymmetric capability to offset the advantages of mass and technology enjoyed by the United States and allies. Increased access to expertise, materials, and technologies heightens the risk that adversaries will seek, acquire, proliferate, and employ WMD. Furthermore, instability in states pursuing or possessing WMD or related capabilities could lead to dangerous WMD crises.

The term WMD includes activities and capabilities related to chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) weapons, which can create a high order of physical damage or mass casualties, but it excludes the means of transporting or propelling the weapon where such means are a separable and divisible part from the weapon. A further asymmetric challenge, is that ‘foreign fighters’ engaged in conflict zones worldwide may bring CBRN weapons knowledge and experience from the battlefield to the streets of major cities in the EUCOM and NORTHCOM AORs. With regard to sabotage or lone actors, the possibility of ‘insiders’ using their position, expertise and knowledge of biological and chemical agents, or even of the security of nuclear facilities, should not be underestimated.

#### Chemical and Biological Weapons

Continued advances in the chemical and biological sciences, while primarily developed for civilian use, have been used for the development of increasingly lethal weapons. These threats have become increasingly widespread, as they are easier to develop, hide, and deploy than nuclear weapons. Virtually all the equipment, technology, and materials needed for the production of chemical and biological agents are dual-use; i.e., have legitimate civilian uses. Until recently, it was legal in many Western countries to purchase and use certain pesticides containing chemicals that have a similar effect on humans to nerve agents. Other potentially lethal chemicals can be purchased with relative ease online or from high street retailers. Legal, as opposed to illicit, acquisition of dual-use materials and agents could therefore be a catalyst in CBRN weapons procurement. Additionally, chemical agent production facilities can be easily disguised.

Biological and chemical weapons are treated differently, and two different treaties – Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) – cover their possession. The former has no inspection provisions while the latter has a robust program. Only Egypt, North Korea, and South Sudan have not signed the CWC treaty, and Israel has yet to ratify.

#### SUSPECTED CHEMICAL & BIOLOGICAL WEAPON STATES

- Angola
- Central African Republic
- Chad
- China
- Cuba
- Egypt
- Iran
- Iraq
- Israel
- Namibia
- North Korea
- Russia
- South Sudan
- Syria
- Venezuela

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For the BTWC treaty the following have not signed or ratified: Angola, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Guinea, Haiti, Israel, Kiribati, Liberia, Micronesia, Namibia, Nepal, Niue, Samoa, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, and Tuvalu. However, the BTWC and CWC treaties have limited legitimacy. The discovery of remaining chemical weapons in Libya after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and in during the Syrian Civil War (2014-2019), only served to reinforce the persistent fact that nations do not always honor the treaties they sign.

Along with nuclear weapons, chemical & biological agents pose a significant threat to U.S. interests, military forces and allies. Simple delivery systems including covert dissemination, incorporated with established smuggling routes such as the drug trafficking corridors through the SOUTHCOM AOR pose a major operation threat to the United States. The simplicity of many of these systems increases the ease of employment, which is more difficult to detect or counter than ICBM delivery. This alternate employment method is particularly attractive to non-state actors. Even if not directly targeted, WMD use anywhere in the world would affect the United States because American likelihood for responding to the event.

### Nuclear Weapons

As in past decades, the risk of nuclear weapon use continues to loom but with an even greater potential for occurrence due to several converging trends. The spread of nuclear technologies and expertise provides the potential for the emergence of new nuclear weapon states. The advancing of the Iranian and North Korean nuclear program capabilities has produced significant pressure on CENTCOM AOR countries and PACOM AOR countries respectively to develop organic nuclear weapons capabilities and increased the threat of other regional nations to contemplate a possible preemptive nuclear strike. This regional nuclear arms race is in stark contrast to the much more stabilized nuclear parity between India and Pakistan, which has evolved into a controlled standoff similar to the Cold War relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. The acquisition of nuclear materials by terrorist groups combined with a faltering trust in the United States or coalition nuclear umbrellas, as well as the possibility of a future disruptive regime change or collapse occurring in a nuclear weapon state continues to raise questions regarding the ability of weak states to control and secure their nuclear arsenals. Many nations began to consider new security arrangements with external powers or reconsider the agreements to which they belonged. In the case of Myanmar, North Korea is playing a pivotal development role.

#### NUCLEAR WEAPON STATES

- *Declared:* China, France, United Kingdom, India, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the United States
- *Undeclared:* Israel, Vietnam, Iran
- *Emerging:* Myanmar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, South Korea
- *Former:* Belarus, Kazakhstan, South Africa and Ukraine

Turkish governmental leaders are questioning NATO's nuclear sharing agreement. Shortly after the 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Saudi Arabia made it clear that it would proceed with its plans to acquire nuclear weapons capability. In the Pacific region, the Japanese and South Korean leaders have for a decade quietly discussed options regarding the possible creation of their own nuclear weapons programs. For years, it was considered highly unlikely that either nation would be able to generate the public support needed to proceed.

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However due to an increasing tension with North Korea coupled with a questionable commitment of a U.S. nuclear umbrella, along with effective Chinese diplomatic and economic pressure to restrain the North Korean nuclear threat the prohibition on developing a domestic nuclear deterrent is in question.

Meanwhile, the United States allowed its nuclear weapons enterprise to atrophy following the Cold War. The concept held by most political and military leaders is that nuclear weapons are unnecessary and replaceable with better or more conventional capabilities. Voluntarily following the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the United States has not operationally tested a nuclear weapon since 1992. Nor has the United States designed a new nuclear weapon over the same period due to laws passed by the U.S. Congress. While small efforts began in 2012 to reinvigorate the enterprise, domestic pressures and defense cuts have barely allowed the sustainment of the infrastructure and weapons systems. Due to the unmatched strength of U.S. Conventional forces and a declining population, Russia has invested heavily in nuclear weapons capability and delivery systems as a defensive countermeasure. This investment in nuclear capability has produced a situation where first strike and retaliatory capabilities are fully on par with the United States.

#### **Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction**

##### **SOCOM**

SOCOM efforts as lead to Counter the-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction has included activities to support USG efforts to curtail the conceptualization, development, possession, proliferation, use, and effects of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), related expertise, materials, technologies, and means of delivery by state and non-state actors. As synchronizer for the global effort, they have worked with and through the COCOMs to mitigate and minimize the threat. While mostly successful, the growth of science and technology continues to present new and unexpected challenges. While all areas of the globe have a WMD challenge, their operational implications vary greatly. All elements of national power need to be synchronized in a collective environment if we are to succeed in this mission.

##### **EUCOM**

EUCOM AOR faces a monumental asymmetric challenge from the threat of ‘foreign fighters’ who have been engaged military operations in the Mideast infiltrating into Europe as harmless asylum seekers. These irregular forces bring CBRN & conventional weapons knowledge and experience from the battlefield, which could be utilized clandestinely to threaten major population centers or critical infrastructure. Sabotage or lone-actor attacks supported by sympathetic ‘insiders’ using their position, expertise and knowledge, presents a critical threat to facilities which utilize toxic industrial materials, biologically hazardous material, and nuclear facilities. Potentially lethal chemicals can still be purchased with relative ease online or from industrial retailers. The legal procurement of dual-use materials for illicit use circumvents the normal military CBRN weapons procurement.

Due to the inability of Russia to match NATO Conventional forces and a declining population, Russia has invested heavily in nuclear weapons capability and delivery systems as a defensive countermeasure. This investment in nuclear capability has produced a situation where first strike



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and retaliatory capabilities are fully on par with the NATO. The potential for a cold war style diplomatic / military relationship to develop is quite possible

#### **PACOM**

In the Pacific region, the Japanese and South Korean leaders have for a decade quietly discussed options regarding the possible creation of their own nuclear weapons programs. For years it was considered highly unlikely that either nation would be able to generate the public support needed to proceed. However, due to an increasing tension with North Korea coupled with the questioning of commitment of a U.S. nuclear umbrella and a lack of effective Chinese diplomatic and economic pressure to restrain the North Korean nuclear threat, the prohibition on developing a domestic nuclear deterrent is in question. This potential regional nuclear arms race is in stark contrast to the much more stabilized nuclear parity between India and Pakistan, which has evolved into a controlled standoff similar to the Cold War relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Terrorist activities throughout the developing nations of the PACOM AOR pose a serious threat to industrial facilities and transportation routes & hubs. The potential for an attack on a facility or vessel with the sole purpose of creating a major HAZMAT event is highly probable given the numerous insurgencies, industrial facilities, and critical transportation hubs in the AOR.

#### **CENTCOM**

The advancing of the Iranian nuclear program capability has produced significant pressure on CENTCOM AOR countries to develop organic nuclear weapons capabilities and increased the threat of other regional nations to contemplate a possible preemptive nuclear strike. The lack of any form of a nuclear response umbrella in the AOR and no effective regional defense support agreement similar to the NATO alliance acts as a catalyst for potential nuclear weapons programs to develop.

Continued but sporadic use of CBRN/HAZMAT material in military conflicts across the AOR provides a training forum for tactical CBRN employment by regular and irregular forces. Experience is fully exportable to other conflict areas.

#### **SOUTHCOM**

The drug and illegal immigration trafficking corridors through the SOUTHCOM AOR pose a major operational threat to the United States for potential WMD attacks. The transiting of these corridors by foreign fighters with CBRN employment expertise, CBRN weapons, and purposely released biological hazards such as Ebola or Small Pox in transiting populations remains a critical threat. Similarly, a CBRN event in many of the fledgling democracies of the AOR could spark a mass migration northward.

#### **NORTHCOM**

Sabotage and lone actors continue to be the most pressing asymmetric challenge. Terrorist foreign fighter who have circumvented the immigration screening process by utilizing illegal immigration trafficking corridors present the greatest CBRN employment risk. These fighters conceal themselves by residing in the numerous ethnic enclaves of recent immigrants.

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Along with the foreign terrorist CBRN threat, the possibility of ‘insiders’ using their position, expertise and knowledge of biological and chemical agents, or even of the security of nuclear facilities, should not be underestimated. These insiders could include native born, legal immigrants, and legitimate visa holders.

Potentially lethal dual-use chemicals acquired through legal means continues to be the most likely means of acquiring CBRN material, as opposed to illicit importation or acquisition.

#### **AFRICOM**

Foreign Fighters returning from conflict zones worldwide may bring CBRN weapons knowledge and experience from the battlefield to the fledgling democracies of Africa. These fighters often return disenfranchised to nations that are ripe for domestic insurgencies. This tactical expertise coupled with the recent expansion of nuclear facilities, biological production facilities, and chemical production facilities creates an environment with all the components necessary for CBRN weapons development and employment. This environment coupled with the illegal immigration trafficking corridors into Europe has the potential to become a major CBRN threat to the western world.

#### **Cyber Warfare**

In addition to the growing threat posed by increased WMD proliferation, increases in information technology have greatly multiplied the threat of disruptive and potentially deadly attacks upon information infrastructure. Over the past decade, U.S. reliance on net-centric technology has significantly increased the nation’s vulnerability to attacks in the cyber domain.

As computer technology advances, the ability to conduct computer network operations (CNO) by state, corporate, criminal, and terrorist organizations rises. By 2023 cyber-crime, cyber-espionage and cyber-attacks and the efforts to counter them cost the global economy nearly one trillion dollars. Some of the main causes for this growth include the low cost of cyber operations, the lack of cyber defenses, the “plausible deniability” the internet affords, and the lack of “cyber rules of engagement” in conflicts between nation-states.

Malicious cyber activity has created significant tensions between China, Russia, and the United States. Numerous cyber-attacks have originated from within Chinese and Russian entities over the past ten years. Although U.S. security agencies are able to trace the attacks back to points of origin in China or Russia it remains difficult to prove that national governments sponsored the attacks rather than individuals, non-state affiliated organizations, or criminals. This continued inability to respond to cyber-based attack is largely due to the continued disagreement in definition of cyber activities by defense and law enforcement communities, stunting the ability to develop clear policy.

The most recent strategic cyber event came in June 2027, when the U.S. base in Qatar suffered a coordinated attack. The facility housing the CAOC simultaneously lost primary power while other industrial control systems were shutdown. As soon as the facility and supporting IT infrastructure returned to operational status, the attackers struck the CAOC’s classified networks resulting in the loss of classified plans, operational documents and scheduling databases. Simultaneously, the base’s power distribution and water treatment facility were compromised, affecting medical facilities and resulting in three deaths from equipment failure. Compromise of

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the water treatment facility led to contamination of the base's water supply causing infection among nearly half of the base's population. The U.S. CAOC was non-mission capable for 96 hours at the end of the attack. The United States has not been able to attribute these actions and no organization has claimed responsibility.

Further, although significant measures are in place to secure the U.S. transportation system infrastructure, the telecommunications system, energy production and distribution systems, and water supply infrastructure remain prime cyber targets for U.S. adversaries. In some respects, cyber warfare has evened the playing field for terrorist groups and developing nations, as they can field an equally effective cyber capability as established states with robust military and security systems.

Over the years, the development of cyber "weaponry" has seen exponential growth, both in sophistication and potential to harm. Western governments have all reported incidents concerning the insertion of erroneous or misleading information into official websites intended to confuse citizens and create mistrust. Governments are not alone in suffering these information attacks. A handful of banks have also disclosed events where attackers altered checking account balances of hundreds of depositors. These malicious events have not resulted in a kinetic conflict, but ordinary citizens and businesses are panicked as they lose faith in the security of information networks. Politically, this insecurity has manifested in attempt to influence the outcome of elections, particularly in weaker nations that make up regional coalitions favorable to U.S. and European interests.

#### **Zbellion**

In the mid-2020s, the age demographic known as Generation Z, or Gen Z, began hitting their thirties. Like the Millennials who preceded them, Gen Z were characterized as even more comfortable – if not dependent upon – technology in nearly every aspect of their lives. Social scientists frequently characterize Gen Z as having grown up with cell phone and internet usage from a very young age, and interacting on social media websites for a significant portion of their socializing. Image and video-intensive media are more popular among this group than textual narratives, and many Gen Z self-identify by the social media communities to which they belong.

Both the September 11 terrorist attacks and the Great Recession greatly influenced the attitudes of this generation in the United States, and resulted in a feeling of unsettlement and insecurity among Gen Z. Although Millennials experienced these events during their coming of age, Gen Z lived through them as part of their childhood, affecting their realism and world-view. Although many Gen Z sought to avoid the financial stresses experienced by their parents, many found themselves stuck with excessive college debt when they discovered employment options did not meet their expectations. Gen Z are often described as seeking independence and opportunity but are also among the least likely to believe there is such a thing as the "American Dream," and that "the system is rigged" against them. Frequently seeing themselves as agents for social change, they crave fulfillment and excitement in their job to help "move the world forward." Despite the technological proficiency they possess, Gen Z actually prefer person-to-person contact as opposed to online interaction. They describe themselves as being involved in their virtual and physical communities, and as having rejected excessive consumerism.

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In early 2025, a group identifying itself as “Zbellion” gained traction on the Dark Web. Zbellion capitalized on the fears and insecurities of Gen Z, and called for a global cyber campaign to expose injustice and corruption and to support various causes it deemed beneficial. It appears that Zbellion initially formed in small groups at parks, rallies, protests and coffee shops, and grew rapidly by promoting an agenda, which targets corporations, financial institutions, and political and non-profit organizations that support “the establishment.” Recruitment appears focused in large cities via face-to-face contact, providing initial instructions for accessing Zbellion websites. These websites provide target lists (to include data needed for identity and credit card theft), payloads, and exploits to activists. Zbellion uses software programs to route any proceeds into laundering programs that ultimately convert national currencies into Bitcoin and make “small, below the threshold donations” to “worthy recipients” and, if Zbellion members claim financial need, to the member who conducted the attack. Zbellion “leadership” assures its members that their cybercrimes are “ultimately justifiable” and untraceable, and that it selects its targets and beneficiaries based on secure polling of “network delegates.”

Zbellion provides its members with sophisticated adaptations of the latest malware, making it difficult for cyber security programs to keep pace with the threat. Computer Network Defense (CND) analysis indicates Zbellion appears to have originated in Seattle and spread rapidly to New York City, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Austin. Today, Zbellion activities has been noted in Vancouver, Toronto, most major European cities, St. Petersburg, Istanbul, Amman, Dubai, Cairo, Tunis, Rabat, Lagos, Nairobi, Johannesburg, New Delhi, Lahore, Tokyo, Osaka, Manila, Jakarta, Hanoi, Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, Panama City, Havana, and Mexico City.

#### **Military Conflicts**

In addition to the constant threat of terrorism, world leaders remain concerned about the potential for conventional conflicts, particularly over natural resources. For example, perceived or actual water shortages could motivate state actors to take unilateral actions to assure access to adequate water flows. In the worst case, this could result in interstate conflicts if government leaders deem assured access to such resources essential for maintaining domestic stability and regime survival. However, even actions short of war could have important geopolitical consequences. Maritime security concerns provide a rationale for naval buildups and modernization efforts, such as the continued development of blue-water naval capabilities by India and China.

#### **Black Market Trafficking**

Following the end of the Cold War, Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) made enormous gains in the newly opened economies of the former Soviet Bloc states and Soviet clients globally). During the 1990’s economic chaos in these countries produced opportunities for TCOs to open new markets in illegal drugs, weapons, WMD, technology, mineral trafficking, and human trafficking.

During the first decade of this century, Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) flourished and aspiring terrorist organizations, such as AQ and Hezbollah, mimicked their business models. This bolstered terror networks revenues and providing them new global reach through established “Black Market” shipping channels though led to confrontation with traditional TCOs with overlapping business interests. While occasionally coming into conflict, many of the TCOs

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and large terrorist organizations have settled into an understanding of their core markets and work to avoid direct hostilities in order to limit government detection.

Exploiting vulnerabilities in government capacity to detect and deter such activity, this illegal economy has flourished in the Caucasus region, South and Central Asia, Oceania, the Tri-Border Region of South America, Mexico, and the Maghreb. Primary transportation conduits include Latin America, Cape Verde, the western African coast, Indonesia, and Somalia, often coopting commercial shipping due to inability for mass screening by port authorities.

Despite intense international pressure to cut down on both the supply and demand, as well as operations to break up the distribution chains, these underground markets continue to thrive. Generating international pressure, human rights groups point to the (estimated) 3.5 million young women believed to be locked into coerced prostitution as a moral imperative for drastic international action. Revenues from the illegal drug economy exceed \$500 billion annually, and believed to comprise less than half of total TCO revenues in the Western Hemisphere. Meanwhile the illegal arms trade has exceeded the \$100 billion mark and has destabilized many countries around the globe.

## **SECTION B: THE UNITED STATES**

With the beginning of the 21st century, new threats emerged within an increasingly complex world. Terrorism has remained a consistent threat to U.S. and world stability. However, other threats of a more conventional form have also arisen. The United States is not necessarily regarded as the lone superpower, with China firmly established on the world stage and Russia, despite its endemic problems, seeking to be recognized as both a power in Europe and on the world stage.

By the time of the 2016 presidential race, national sentiment had turned decidedly toward domestic issues. With the Democratic and Republican parties seemingly continually polarized over almost every issue of substance – sovereign debt, immigration, taxation, entitlement reform, etc. – the campaign became one of the most divisive in U.S. history. This severely polarized political atmosphere led to little progress in dealing with major national issues, causing both parties to face popular backlash for their entrenched politics-as-usual philosophies.

As public disenchantment continued to increase and evolve, an independent populist movement, called *America on the Move*, succeeded in capturing the national imagination, quickly garnering increased levels of support from the ever-widening moderate center. Its leaders forged a comprehensive platform that addressed the major domestic issues – government reform, crime and drugs, public education, tax reform, health care, and the economy – and espoused a renewed spirit of compromise that fostered hope of real progress on pressing national issues. Led by a charismatic candidate, Karl Maxwell McGraw, a former Independent Senator from Arizona, *America on the Move* conducted an aggressive, well-run campaign. Increasing McGraw's popularity was his promise to bring "TRUE" change to Washington and the nature of governance. In the 2020 presidential election, McGraw won with 48% of the popular vote, the remainder split between Republican and Democratic candidates. The broad national support he enjoyed helped sweep in other independent candidates to capture a third of the seats in both houses of Congress and almost half of the State Governors. On January 20, 2021, McGraw took the oath of office as the 46th President of the United States.

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Upon assuming office, President McGraw faced an immediate test when a successful cyber-attack in February shut down the control system of the Susquehanna nuclear power plant in Berwick, Pennsylvania, shaking the confidence of the American people in the government's ability to protect critical infrastructure. President McGraw immediately called for an improved cyber security program to include increasing the role of Department of Defense's (DoD's) U.S. Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) in preventing, countering, and mitigating cyber-attacks on critical civilian networks. The CYBERCOM commander is now a four-star billet and is no longer dual-hatted as the National Security Agency head. President McGraw also called upon CYBERCOM to develop both a defensive and offensive strategy and doctrine. The President's push on the offensive side has drawn a backlash from some European nations and on Capitol Hill, where his political opponents claim McGraw is laying the groundwork for a cyber conflict that would allow him to avoid the War Powers Act.

Almost immediately upon assuming office, the President mandated that WMD capability must not fall into the hands of terrorists. He reiterated the administration's concerns that security of existing WMD materials must be a global issue and called for a global recommitment to the PSI.

Within the first two years of his term, the McGraw administration had some high-profile successes in the prevention of terrorist attacks. The most significant of these was stopping a bombing campaign targeting a number of U.S. embassies and consulates in Europe. This plot was uncovered by intelligence agencies through enhanced surveillance authorities and interagency information sharing put in place following the 9/11 attacks.

However, by May 2023, the tide shifted as the United States suffered several conventional and cyber terrorist attacks. These attacks included physical bombing, sabotage, and cyber-attacks of U.S. domestic critical infrastructure (research laboratories, pipelines, energy nodes, and industries). PAL claimed responsibility for the cyber-attacks. In spite of these terror attacks, voter sentiment remained positive towards the President. On a parallel path, significant economic growth signaled a return to economic prosperity across the board in the short term. All of which allowed President McGraw to win reelection in 2024.

However, not long into his second term President McGraw faced the most severe crisis of his presidency. At 0710 on Monday, 23 May 2025, terrorists affiliated with AQIM detonated two massive truck-borne explosive devices on both the New Jersey and New York ends of the Lincoln Tunnel during morning rush hour, killing 435 people and injuring 618 more. Apparently, the devices, likely destined for high profile targets somewhere in Manhattan, detonated short of their intended targets. Investigators determined that the devices were built in rural New York and transported in trucks stolen from a Vermont catering service.

The President, backed by a resolute Congress, wasted no time in making the decision to eliminate AQIM and its affiliates through the destruction of its operating and training bases in Mauritania and Mali. The Canadian government, following a nearly simultaneous AQIM attack on their embassy in Mauritania, echoed President McGraw's determination and agreed to co-lead the operation with the United States. The operation, code-named DESERT STRIKE, pulled together a coalition of more than a dozen nations. The President promised the American people a well-planned, rapid and efficient operation that would conclude in three years.

With the cooperation of the Mauritanian government, a combined U.S./Canadian led coalition force began landing at Nouakchott, Mauritania on 15 June 2025. The force included a U.S.

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Division headquarters, six Brigade Combat Teams, a reinforced Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), and significant U.S. Air Force (USAF) and Special Operations Forces (SOF) formations. Naval support consisted of two Carrier Strike Groups (CSG), one off the coast of Mauritania and one off the coast of Cote D'Ivoire. The Canadian government contributed three Army Battalions. The coalition force swept through the country, attacking and dismantling the camps along with the social network providing sanctuary to AQIM. That September, with coalition forces marshaled along the western border of northern Mali, President McGraw received Mali President Sibibe's consent to allow the combined force to enter Mali and pursue the enemy. By the end of October, offensive operations had moved into Mali and coalition efforts in Mauritania turned to building regional security capacity and ensuring stabilization. Coalition efforts in Mali proved to be much more difficult, however, since many AQIM fighters interspersed themselves among the local Mali population. After a year of only moderate success in Mali, and marginal progress in building security capacity in Mauritania, coalition forces found themselves far behind schedule.

In November of 2027, the United States was supposed to begin the execution of the transition of responsibility in West Africa to the African Union (AU), however, they had found themselves woefully behind. Back in June of 2027, the AU agreed to work with the coalition to transition coalition forces and assume overall mission responsibility. However, in October, citing inadequate progress and up against a self-imposed deadline, President McGraw sought to solicit additional support from either NATO or the UN to facilitate and augment AU assumption of the Maghreb mission, allowing the subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces. NATO declined involvement as an organization, but individual member nations, under French leadership, state they would consider the deployment of an interim force to bridge the gap between the DESERT STRIKE coalition drawdown and AU assumption of the mission.

In October, the AU began deploying stabilization forces to selected forward operating areas to allow the coalition forces to prepare for withdrawal. Coalition forces remain in place to help implement the secure deployment of European and AU forces and to ensure the overall situation was sufficiently stable to begin withdrawal from the region. Drawdown of non-African coalition forces is scheduled to begin on May 1, 2028. Half the U.S. force will return to the United States by July 2026, with all combat forces planned to be out of the theater by October 2028. The plan is for a full handover of operational control to the AU or an interim force on 31 December 2028.

### **Economic Outlook**

The U.S. economy has essentially recovered from the effects of the Asian recession. Job growth, the traditional lagging indicator, began marked improvement beginning in March of 2024, with the economy adding an average of 250,000 jobs per month since that time. Sectors leading the way were electronics, energy and manufacturing. Due to the economic downturn caused by the Asian recession, the U.S. real estate market began to fall back, but eventually picked up enough momentum to keep pace with the overall economic recovery. Lastly, in 2023 the McGraw administration restored and strengthened the Glass-Steagall provisions of the 1933 Banking Act, which, among other things, separates commercial and investment banking. The current major economic data points include:

- Unemployment: holding at approximately 5.3%
- Inflation: approximately 2%

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- Annual GDP growth: 2018 to 2020 – 2.85% average; 2021-2023 – 0.25%, 1.46% and 2.65% per year respectively; 2024-2026 – 3.25% average
- Long term interest rates: approximately 7%
- Sovereign debt: overall decrease to 65% of GDP
- From 2018-2027, DoD spending fell from 4% GDP to 2.7% GDP, where it remains

#### **National Security Outlook**

Today, the United States finds itself as one of a number of important actors on the world stage. Even in the military realm – where the United States continues to possess considerable advantages – advances by others in science and technology, expanded adoption of irregular warfare tactics by both state and non-state actors, proliferation of nuclear weapons and long-range precision weapons, and growing use of cyber warfare attacks have increasingly constricted U.S. freedom of action. Of particular concern to the United States is the increased anti-access/area-denial capabilities possessed by a growing number of nations, especially in Asia and the Middle East.

As the post-Cold War world matured in the early part of this century, the global political landscape shifted from a unipolar orientation, with the United States as the sole superpower, to a multi-polar orientation with regional hegemony wielding more influence and power, led by China and the Russian Federation, alongside and most often in opposition to the United States. Regional organizations, specifically the African Union, European Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), had increasingly tried to assume forward leaning postures in resolving regional and extra-regional challenges and crises, responding to disaster, and offering leadership to international activities. However, a general lack of consensus on many of the more serious issues has done more to divide than unite, which has exposed these organizations as little more than relatively effective economic unions and multilateral discussion forums. This, along with a diffusion of power and influence among a variety of state and non-state actors has made it difficult for the United States to build multi-lateral support for many of its initiatives. On top of this, pockets of distrust of American power and national interests have made it politically and culturally difficult for the United States to act unilaterally. Nevertheless, the United States remains globally active, retaining its significant role in addressing major global issues.

Given the continued trend of terrorist attacks within the United States, the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) released a major report in 2023 detailing myriad critical homeland security shortcomings. Among other issues, the report cited the inadequate sharing of intelligence by regional and national security services in certain areas, which creates a dangerous window of vulnerability in security at ports, land borders, power plants and oil refineries. The practice of treating every reported incident as a potential threat partially creates this vulnerability, as the vast majority are innocent happenstance. The volume of reports overwhelms the security service while the small number of credible threats fosters a sense of complacency resulting in limited follow-up on more serious reports. The CFR report also concluded that America's cyber domain is woefully vulnerable to penetration by adversaries, and that public-health preparedness against chemical and biological attack is dangerously inadequate.

Another point of emphasis in the CFR report was the vulnerability of the nation's 361 commercial ports. For several years, the majority of bulk commercial shipping activity



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concentrated at a few ports; for example, movement of 43% of all maritime containers had passed through three ports: the New York and New Jersey port complex, South Louisiana, and a rehabilitated Houston Texas. However, advancements in container shipping have increased the number of containers any one ship can carry from 6-8 thousand up to 12-15 thousand. In addition, upgrades to several ports, specifically Miami, New York//New Jersey, and Norfolk, to receive these ships have significantly lessened dependence on a limited number of shipping points of entry. Along with these improvements to throughput, these ports have become more attractive to terrorist attacks, and these changes have only increased the number of ports that terrorists might select as targets for both ease of engagement and level of catastrophic result to commerce. A WMD or cyber-attack, or a severe weather event, at any of these locations could severely impact global commerce. As past port closures demonstrated, the cost to the economy could total \$1 billion per day.

Another area of vulnerability concerns the danger of chemical and biological attack against the national food supply. Experts within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Federal Drug Administration (FDA), and the Armed Forces Medical Intelligence Center (AFMIC) have stated that the United States remains highly vulnerable to bioterrorism, particularly against the food supply. In response, within the last year the USDA doubled the number of food inspectors, but even so, the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Government Accountability Office have both declared publicly that government oversight is “woefully inadequate in this area.”

Over the past decade, while the nation focused on the international terrorist threat, the threat from organized domestic terrorist groups increased significantly. Domestic terrorists, often with international affiliations, continue to use violence and criminal activity to further their agendas.

#### **Significant Designated Terror Groups**

##### ***Mara Salvatrucha 13***

Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) is a violent criminal group founded in Los Angeles by El Salvadorian immigrants, which then ‘spread’ back to El Salvador. For most of its history MS-13 has functioned like a street gang – engaging in deadly spats with rival gangs, participating in petty crime and narcotics dealing, and maintaining local turf, both in major cities and prisons. However, the group has expanded their interests into local and then regional politics in Central America and the resultant organization has taken on goals more associated with terrorism rather than organized crime. Although the future of MS-13 is difficult to predict, the main thrust of the group's activities will likely focus on trafficking and gang activity to support new political power. With the resources to dominate regions of Central America and the capability to cause serious disruption in the United States and Canada, the unprecedented manpower and geographic dispersal of MS-13 make it a serious threat. Of additional concern is MS-13's experience in human trafficking, a capability grown and adapted over the last several decades which efficiently moves significant numbers of people in and out of the United States.

##### ***Environmentalists Against Capitalist Organization (EACO)***

EACO is a lethal environmental anti-capitalist group with global connections. This group, formed in 2010, was part of Anti-Capitalist Convergence. Originally developed as umbrella organizations, Anti-Capitalist Convergences coordinate different groups and struggles. However,

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a few groups, such as EACO, have grown large enough to separate and self-sustain. In the wake of the 1%er riots in the early 2010s, activists in cities such as Seattle, Washington DC, and Chicago, formed Convergences to carry out protests more effectively and to ensure that anti-capitalist organizing would continue after major demonstrations had left the city. Recently EACO has adopted increasingly violent tactics, targeting executive board meetings of large corporations, particularly in natural resource industries such as oil, coal, natural gas, and logging by bombing corporate offices. The group has also sabotaged on logging infrastructure, tainted food, and conducted cyber-attacks against corporate computer systems. The FBI estimates that EACO has committed over 400 criminal acts in the United States since 2020, resulting in 126 deaths and damage in excess of \$862 million with more than half of the deaths and damage having occurred within the past eighteen months.

#### ***Anonymous***

Declared a terrorist organization after it conducted an August 2015 SCADA attack that resulted in 15 deaths, Anonymous is a loose organization of malicious black-hat hackers. They attacked the power grid in Louisiana in order to protest state restriction of on-line gambling. Looking to maintain the flow of tax revenue associated with live casinos, the state legislature pushed through a sequence of bills that made on-line gambling illegal and punishable by up to five years in jail. Anonymous claims its attacks are simply intended to maintain internet freedoms and has vowed similarly destructive acts will continue if lawmakers try to rein-in internet “freedom.”

## **SECTION C: REGIONAL SUMMARIES**

### **THE AMERICAS**

#### **Drugs, Violence, and Terrorism**

The long feared union of transnational criminal organizations and violent extremist organizations finally manifested itself in the shape of the 23 May 2025 terrorist attacks in New York. Investigators learned that several of the participants, including the vehicle drivers, came into the United States via established smuggling routes from South America. The narcotics / terrorism nexus long viewed primarily as a funding source for ideologically motivated terror organizations is now an operational support system. The attack proved that this system is capable of providing terror cells access to target areas and weapons. Taking advantage of this painstaking crafted human and narco transportation system, the AQIM operatives moved undetected across multiple international borders, supported by an equally impressive network of safe houses and funding sources throughout the United States.

There are many concerns about conditions in Latin America and the Caribbean. The financial base provided by narcotics coupled with weak national governments in some nations enabled criminal organizations (known as cartels) to organize overtly. Near-failed states positioned in geographically convenient areas empowered the cartels to assume expanded roles as de facto governments, building popular loyalty that reduced public demand for democratic rule of law. While not viewed as legitimate governments by any nation, the cartels clearly control territory within the region, and are capable of violently resisting attempts to assert sovereignty. These ungoverned spaces, clustered in Venezuela, Bolivia, the Andean Ridge and the Tri-Border Area,

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constitute a direct threat to democratic governance in the region. Instability generated by areas of ungoverned space creates the potential for national security problems that threaten the sovereignty of local nation-states as well as the security of the U.S. homeland.

Over the past several years, a number of terrorists from the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region successfully entered the United States from the south. Investigators found a trail that leads from the Middle East, through Northern Africa into southern Europe, then to South and Central America, and across the Mexican border. The general trend is for terrorists to move from the MENA region to southern France or Spain; from there they take a flight to Paraguay, where they receive basic support; and from Paraguay, they fly to Mexico City. Increased airline scrutiny has opened a second route using existing narcotics smuggling routes from the Maghreb to South America via the Cape Verde sea-lanes. A weakened central government in Venezuela, with a systemic inability to control access through its ports now provides easier access to narco-controlled areas in South America. Using cash generated by the importation of heroin from Afghanistan, several terrorist organizations have allegedly established training camps within the cartel controlled areas.

#### **Narco-terrorism and Corruption**

Fueled by huge profits from the illegal drug economy and the consolidation of distribution networks in South America and Mexico, cartels have stepped up their attempts to influence elected officials, governmental policies, and even isolated societies throughout the western hemisphere. While violence is the most frequently used technique in South America and Mexico, corruption and bribery is the new tool of influence north of the American border. Several leading cartels have also expanded their production capabilities closer to their distribution networks and begun to take greater control of shipping networks to decrease risk and improve profits. The Organization of American States (OAS) reported that in 2022 cartels spent \$20 billion to buy public officials and/or support specific candidates for office. Popular opinion in the United States is beginning to believe the “narco-corruption” is affecting the rule of law north of the border. Recent high profile stories have fueled this debate. Discoveries of multiple tunnels under the southern border, some of which included loading docks for trucks and paved roads, guarded by foreign nationals with heavy weapons and obvious military training outraged citizens in border states. Additionally, several charges of election tampering in the 2022 mayoral elections and the rise in corruption convictions of law enforcement officials fueled a rise in popular demand for federal action along the northern side of the U.S. border.

#### **Rise of Authoritarian-Socialist Agendas and Decline of U.S. Influence in Region**

The OAS is a regional organization comprised of all 35 independent states in the Americas and constitutes the main political, juridical, and social governmental forum in the Hemisphere. The rise of populist/leftist and, in some cases, socialist governments and the decline of U.S. influence in Latin America has continued since the mid-2000s. Although its leadership in the region has declined over the past decade, the United States is still a vital and formative member of the OAS. According to regional foreign policy analysts, the United States has the ability to recover some of its former influence if Washington would modify its foreign policy to acknowledge that all sovereign nations, even those with non-democratic forms of government, have the right to set their own domestic course.

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The genesis of the movement towards more authoritarian governments appears to stem from the economic disparity between the rich and poor, which increased over the past decade in many Latin America countries. Article two of the OAS charter states “elimination of extreme poverty is an essential part of the promotion and consolidation of representative democracy and is the common and shared responsibility of the American States.” However, despite efforts by the OAS, there has been a marked lack of progress in achieving this goal. Over recent years, in dramatically increased numbers, severely disenfranchised electorates have voted in favor of authoritarian types of governments. The most obvious examples in South America are the countries of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, where each has an avowed socialist/revolutionary president. Further, in Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega returned to power as a Castro-style leader.

The reason for the decline of U.S. regional influence is contentious, but numerous regional foreign policy analysts agree that when the United States entered into the Global War on Terrorism and the Iraq war, Washington became too Middle East-centric and largely ignored the issues of their southern neighbors. To fill the leadership gap, the dynamic and determined leaders of the region’s socialist countries, such as Hugo Chavez, inserted themselves into regional leadership roles. Further, the socialist countries looked outside the region to build relationships around the world that would benefit their causes without hindering their domestic politics. A prime benefactor of this approach, China, has increased its political influence in the region by gradually injecting itself through direct investment, military arms sales, and training – roles previously performed in large part by the United States. Cautious about taking on these roles, China has managed to avoid direct confrontation with the United States over American interests in this region. Beijing has established trade with several countries throughout Central and South America. In fact, Chinese trade increased from \$70 billion in 2006 to over \$280 billion in 2021. Energy investment is an important factor for China. Examples of projects include investment in Argentina’s petroleum industry, Brazil’s pipeline infrastructure and the rescue of the failing Ecuadorian state-run petroleum company by the China National Petroleum Corporation. Firms associated with the Chinese government now own 45% of Pluspetrol, Peru’s largest foreign oil operation. Of some concern to analysts is the fifty-year contract to manage the Panama Canal, as this operation allows a strategic vantage point from which to observe and control commercial and naval traffic. It also bears noting that China is America’s second largest trading partner. To some degree, the persistent economic weakness that has plagued China since 2021 has diminished their role as a regional funding source, but their long-term investments in infrastructure, raw materials and energy has helped to stabilize their economy. China will remain a significant player in the region, despite continued financial issues at home.

### **North America**

#### **Canada**

Canada views a stable world order as indivisible from the physical security of Canada and essential for the domestic wealth and prosperity of a country heavily dependent on trade, especially with the United States. Canada faced a period of relative political uncertainty over the past ten years, as executive power alternated back and forth between the minority Conservative and Liberal governments.

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Economically, the continued consequences of global warming have had the effect of a constant rise in temperatures across the nation, opening up growing seasons in lands, once too cold, to produce crops. However, large agribusinesses control most of these regions, growing corn shipped to the United States for bio-fuel production. Only very small regions are set aside for the cultivation of crops for food or feed.

The threat of terrorist attacks within Canada and against Canadian interests around the world has grown over the past ten years. This main threat comes from terrorists using the country as a transit point, safe haven, and base for fund-raising activities that take advantage of Canada's relatively open immigration and refugee policies. The possible use of Canadian territory by terrorists intending to attack the United States is of special concern. Although Canada has somewhat reformed its border security over the past 20 years, it has been unable to pass the necessary reforms to significantly influence this activity.

On 23 May 2025, a large explosion rocked the Canadian Embassy in Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital, destroying most of the embassy building and killing 135 people, including the Canadian Ambassador and his staff. AQIM immediately took credit for this attack, and implied that there would be more attacks against western targets in the near future. Canada responded by joining the Operation DESERT STRIKE coalition and, along with the United States, assumed a major role in supplying forces in northwestern Africa. The Canadian Prime Minister, Richard Baker, has pledged to begin withdrawing their forces from Mali and Mauritania on 1 April 2028.

#### **Mexico**

The overall stability of Mexico is still fragile despite a marked decrease in drug-cartel related violence over the past decade. Adding to the fragility are the dynamic changes that have occurred to the political landscape in the northern states of Mexico since 2014. Mexico remains a democratic government with public elections within a multi-party system, but corruption is rampant in Mexican elections and politics. There are three large and dominant political parties:

- National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN), a right of center party
- Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), the dominant party at the local, state, and national levels for most of the 20th century
- Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD), a left of center party

Other smaller political parties survive in isolation or by forming local coalitions with any of the big three. The most significant small party that has entered the political scene and vying to become a large party in the past decade is the El Partido del Rio Bravo del Norte (PRBN).

The PRI dominated Mexican politics and the Presidency for 71 years until the election of Vicente Fox (PAN) in 2000. In the 2012 presidential election, Enrique Pena Nieto (PRI) defeated the PAN and PRD. Pena Nieto's platform regarding drug related violence was to focus on reducing the violence itself rather than targeting the cartels but the details of how to accomplish this were never clear. After the election, Pena Nieto pushed the creation of a Mexican National Police force, or gendarme, as a centerpiece of that effort. By 2015, it was apparent that the Mexican National Police was rife with corruption and frequently controlled by

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the cartels within the regions they influenced. While violence against citizens reduced somewhat, corruption rose to an all-time high and drug traffickers experienced increased revenues. Partially due to this situation, the Mexican people rejected the PRI and elected the PAN candidate Ernesto Madero in the 2018 presidential election despite strong opposition from the growing influence of the PRBN. Insisting that Madero is corrupt, the PRBN, in league with drug cartels, continues to expand its influence in many northern Mexican states, preying upon the poor.

Jose Agustin Prado, the PRBN's founder, political architect, and first candidate, won a seat in Chihuahua's state congressional election in 2014. Prado, a previous unknown in politics, entered the political landscape through a surprise victory. Allegedly, members of one of the major drug cartels gunned down two opposition candidates the day before the election. Ironically, Prado ran on a platform that promised to decrease cartel and border violence while reducing poverty and increasing educational opportunities in the state. His plan was to rely less on the weak national government and more on the state. He believed in the need for a stronger state security apparatus in order to quell the violence. During Prado's three-year term in office, he gained great popularity as a strong advocate of state's rights and as an anti-American zealot. Prado was able to convince other congressional representatives in the state to dedicate important state resources to build up, organize, and equip a large local militia. The militia's efforts worked to markedly decrease violence in the state by the end of Prado's term. At the same time, Prado's wife, Maria Prado, created a social services organization within the party to provide necessities for the poverty-stricken citizens in her husband's district. Maria Prado raised funds for these services primarily through large financial contributions from philanthropists whose local businesses benefitted from improved security. By the close of Prado's three-year term, his popularity, along with that of his party, soared not only in his congressional district in Chihuahua, but among citizens of the violence-torn states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja California as well.

In 2016, Jose Prado ran for governor of Chihuahua and won a landslide victory over major party candidates. By the end of 2020, PRBN held the seats of Governor of Chihuahua as well as the Mayoral seats of the cities of Chihuahua and Delicias along with 17 of the 33 state congressional seats. PRBN gains also spread to the states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja California. PRBN controls 40% of the congressional seats in Sonora as well as two Mayoral seats. The PRBN holds between 20-30% of the congressional seats in Baja California and Sinaloa with pundit projections that they will gain considerably more seats in the next election.

The drug war in Mexico reached its peak in 2017 claiming over 60,000 lives between 2008 and 2017. Mexican citizens, weary of the violence, ousted the Calderon government in the 2012 elections. The new government through pinpoint enforcement and tacit support of the Sinola Cartel swayed the war in favor of Sinola and the violence quickly dropped to pre-2008 levels and ushering in a "pax narcotica." Following the death of Joaquín Guzmán, a new leader heads Sinola Cartel, known only as "El Jefe" he quickly took advantage of the "pax Narcotica" to expand his own base of operations inside of Mexico and diversified from heroin and Marijuana distribution to methamphetamines production and distribution on a massive scale. By 2021, law officials seized more than 500 tons of methamphetamine attributed to the Sinola Cartel at various ports. However, the Cartel's influence and activity north of the border also expanded as El Jefe embarked on a campaign to influence local enforcement, governmental policies, and even sway the elections of local government officials.

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Along with the genesis of the new PRBN political party, over the past decade a new and extremely violent vigilante Mexican militant group, named the Triastian Vaqueros, has risen to notoriety. This new organization appeared in northern Mexican states when they ambushed a meeting between the Juárez and Los Zetas cartels killing over 30 mid-level cartel operatives. The Vaqueros took responsibility for the murders, claiming that it was working on behalf of the Mexican people to eliminate the devastating turmoil that the Mexican drug cartels cause. Further, the group claimed it would use any means necessary to destroy the drug cartels and their government lackeys for the last time. Since the Triastian Vaqueros made this public statement five years ago, they have repeatedly claimed responsibility for numerous ambushes made against cartel operatives and the kidnappings and murder of over one hundred public officials in the Northern Mexico states of Chihuahua, Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja California who were linked to the drug cartels. More alarmingly in the past few months, there have been two separate incidents involving the murders of American citizens in Ciudad Juarez, including the decapitation of an Army NCO stationed at Fort Bliss. Intelligence officials implicated the Vaqueros in both incidents. Despite the Vaqueros entry onto the already violent scene in Mexico, overall drug-related violence has decreased in the four Northern Mexican states listed above over the past ten years. It is unknown whether the Vaqueros vigilante efforts or the new PRBN political movement is responsible for the decrease in violence. Some journalists have speculated that the Vaqueros and PRBN are linked, but both groups deny the claim and there is no evidence linking them.

In part, due to the decreased violence in the Northern States, a new Mexican immigrant relief organization called La Vida Sustentador (LVS) has sprung up to provide services to immigrants on their way to the United States. LVS also donated funds and materials to other organizations such as the No More Deaths, Humane Borders, and the Catholic Church, which are already conducting this mission along the Mexican/U.S. border. The Catholic Church was initially hesitant to receive funds and materials from this new upstart group, but could not morally turn down assistance, which may lead to saving human lives.

Although most illegal immigrants crossing into the United States are just trying to make a better life for themselves, the border serves as an infiltration point for terrorists entering the country. Substantial evidence exists that terrorists from the Middle East and North Africa transit the Mexican-U.S. border. Intelligence documents show Islamist terrorists camouflage themselves as Hispanics while conducting business with violent drug-trafficking organizations. The documents also provide evidence that there has been a flood of name changes from Arabic to Hispanic and the reported linking of drug cartels along the Texas border with Middle East and North Africa terrorism. Further, it is a well-established fact that the money from illegal drugs is the top financial mechanism to support terrorist operations.

### **Caribbean**

#### **Cuba**

Cuba has had the looming issue of a post Raul Castro government for the last several years. Raul has been the leader of the communist regime since Fidel died in late 2016. Since his death, the Cuban pro-democracy movement has not been able to shake communist rule. With Raul Castro reportedly on his deathbed since July and an increase in drug-cartel related violence the overall

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stability of Cuba is becoming fragile. Emboldened pro-democracy groups have begun actively demonstrating in the streets calling for a new government. The Cuban government's apparent lack of response to the demonstrations inspired the pro-democracy movement to declare three pro-democracy political parties.

- Democratic Party of Cuba (Partido Demócrata de Cuba)
- Independent Republic Party of Cuba (Partido Independiente República de Cuba)
- Freedom Confederation of Cuba (Confederacion Libertad de Cuba)

Intelligence sources have reported an increase of communications from Cuba to the Russian and Iranian governments.

Due to the increase in cartel related violence and the imminent death of Raul Castro, voices inside President McGraw's America on the Move party have begun to call for revocation of the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 and an end to the feet wet/feet dry policy. This potential change in policy and with it the removal of preferential treatment of Cuban immigrants has led to an uptick in movement by sea of immigrants. This situation demonstrates the potential for a mass migration incident similar to the Mariel Boatlift of 1980, as Cubans seek to start the process to gain U.S. Citizenship prior to a sundown of the law.

## Central America

### Overview

Despite the passage into U.S. law of the *Dominican Republic – Central America Free Trade Agreement* (DR-CAFTA) in 2012, the Central American region is not prospering. Individual countries and overall regional stability remain threatened. The *maras* (gangs) engage in rampant crime, committing thousands of murders and contributing to a flourishing drug trade. Central America's governments, meanwhile, seem unable to meet the challenge, lacking skills, leadership, and the money necessary to fight these super gangs.

Central America has experienced a dramatic increase in violent crime over the past decades. Guatemala and Honduras are two of the most violent countries in the world. While income inequality is a major factor, the Central American region is unfortunately located between the biggest drug production area in the world and the biggest drug consumer, the United States. Therefore, a vast amount of illegal drugs flows through the area, creating a criminal environment that perpetuates violence at a level unacceptable for most civil societies.

## South America

### Overview

Almost the entire global supply of cocaine comes from Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. The South American population has grown steadily, approaching 650 million, with 74% of the population living in urban areas. Forty percent of the 2015 rural population has moved to urban areas by 2025. While the region is not a major oil producer as a whole, Venezuela has significant proven petroleum reserves and the largest natural gas reserves on the continent.



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#### **Venezuela**

President Vladimir Gonzalez is the handpicked successor of Nicolás Maduro. Maduro was the successor to Hugo Chavez, the populist anti-American leader who passed away in 2013. Venezuela's oil industry collapsed after nationalization, the 2015 adjustment in the oil market, the resulting economic chaos reduced Venezuela's role as an exporter of "Bolivian Socialism." Consequently, its support to nascent like-minded regimes has slowed dramatically as the nation struggles to feed its people and maintain social order.

Although resource rich, the prolonged slump in oil prices coupled with both the relative difficulty in refining Venezuelan crude oil and the sorry state of its oil extraction infrastructure combined to make finding an international partner for the state-run oil enterprise extremely difficult. China and Russia both expressed an interest in negotiating oil deals. However, the inability of the Gonzalez government to provide security throughout the nation has dampened their enthusiasm for large-scale investment and construction.

The economic crisis in Venezuela began with the nationalization of the oil industry under Chavez and continued under Maduro's dogged adherence to strict socialist economic policies. When the per barrel price of crude stayed below the profit line required to make Venezuela's fields cost-effective, the economy finally buckled and collapsed. This prolonged economic crisis caused food rioting, large-scale protests and for the last five years, near collapse of the central government. Corruption is rife through all levels of government and business, fueling the corresponding rise in Cartels who control large swaths of land and populations across Venezuela. Due to endemic corruption and lack of resources, the government has been unsuccessful in its limited attempts to assert sovereignty over cartel strongholds. Considered ungoverned spaces these areas coincide with some of Venezuela's richest oil and gas reserves, the "Orinoco Belt."

#### **Brazil**

Brazil, as the largest country in South America, remains the heart of the continent. It borders every country in South America except Chile and Ecuador. Its population is 70% urbanized with 14 cities whose population exceeds 1 million. Most of the Amazon Basin, including its largely untapped vast natural resources, lies with Brazil. Brazil has long been seen as a regional power with potential as a major power on the global stage. Yet Brazil has consistently failed to achieve its potential, largely because 20% of the population lives below poverty line, with Afro-Brazilians composing the majority of the poor. The income gap between rich and poor is the largest in South America, with the poor suffering from urban overcrowding, slums, high crime rates, and high drug addiction rates. The majority of the population is crowded into teeming coastal cities leaving the vast interior of Brazil with sparse population and ungoverned areas. There is significant, widespread corruption in both state and federal governments.

Relations between Venezuela and Brazil deteriorated during Chavez's tenure as the Brazilian government resented his posturing as the regional spokesperson. Brazil considered blocking Venezuela's entrance into the MERCOSUR common market, which is a Regional Trade Agreement (RTA) among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. It voted against Venezuela's campaign for a rotating seat on the UN Security Council, and supported Colombia in its maritime dispute with Venezuela. The new administration voted into office in 2023 found itself embroiled in a gang war for control of the "Favelas" (slum areas) in Rio de Janeiro and Sao

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Paulo with the “First Command” (*Primeiro Comando da Capital*) (PCC) in Sao Paulo and the “Red Command” in Rio. Late in 2018, these organized criminal gangs with links to Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) overran police stations, looted banks, and torched gasoline stations and city offices. Heavily armed criminals outgunned the police and national troops were called to quell the violence.

Brazil has become a major user of nuclear power. The completion of a uranium enrichment plant in Resende let Brazil make its own low-enriched uranium fuel for its nuclear power industry. The plant produces the nuclear fuel used by Brazil's four operational nuclear power reactors (Angra 1, 2, 3, and 4) with an additional two under construction. Continuing efforts to further its nuclear program, Brazil signed a nuclear cooperation memorandum with Russia back in 2009. Areas for cooperation included: design and construction of research reactors, production of radioisotopes, development of technologies for power reactors, and uranium prospecting.

Due to a weak security environment and unknown levels of criminal and terrorist infiltration in government agencies, this indigenous uranium production capability has raised international concerns over Brazil's ability to safeguard nuclear materials. The potential for terrorists to use the Tri-Border Area (TBA) for smuggling stolen nuclear materials has presented as a very real threat in the reports of global nuclear proliferation watchdog agencies.

Brazil has not agreed to sign an Additional Protocol (INFCIRC-540) with the IAEA, which would expand inspections to sites not directly related to nuclear materials. Some provisions of the Additional Protocol such as unannounced inspections are already included in the Quadripartite Agreement between Brazil, Argentina, the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC), and the IAEA. The new defense strategy states that, “Brazil will not sign any additions to the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) until the nuclear powers have made progress towards nuclear disarmament. Brazil is a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and, with neighbor Argentina, has firmly opposed a new text of the guidelines which would make the Additional Protocol a requirement for supply.”

#### **Tri-Border Area**

A notorious ungoverned area in the western hemisphere is the TBA. This junction of the borders of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay has long been a safe-haven for bandits, smugglers, and revolutionaries. Far from the reach of the respective capitals, the TBA has been both a thorn in the side and an unspoken boon to all three nations. Currently, the area is a safe haven for TCOs, regional mafias, and Transnational Terrorist Organizations (TTOs). Criminal activities range from money laundering, counterfeiting, product piracy, internet crime, smuggling, and a flourishing drugs-for-guns trade.

Islamic terrorist groups use the TBA for fundraising, recruitment, training of operatives, and as a forward base for operations throughout the hemisphere. The TTOs are deeply involved in the drugs for guns trade, with the profits used primarily to support Islamic terror organizations in the Middle East and North Africa. A testament to the extent of the financial activities that undergird these criminal/terrorist organizations within the TBA is the fact that Ciudad del Este has the third most daily financial transactions behind London and New York City.

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#### **The Andean Ridge**

In 2013, the strategic situation in the Andean Ridge (Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia) was marked by the rise of Maoist-Nativist insurgency in Peru that threatened to spill over into neighboring states, Nativist political movements in Ecuador and Bolivia, and the persistence of the narco-war in Colombia. In recent years, historic tensions have resurfaced along the Peruvian-Ecuadorian border. Illegal drug production and trafficking is increasing. There are strong ties between TCOs and insurgent groups highlighted by a two-way drugs-for-guns trade. Multiple ungoverned areas provide safe havens for insurgents and TCOs.

#### **Bolivia**

Bolivia is seen as the “Third pillar of 21st Century Socialism” (Venezuela being the first pillar and Ecuador the second). President Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first elected president of Andean Indian descent, has governed since 2006. Initially financed by Venezuelan aide, it now sustains its finances through exploitation of its large gas reserves and energy exports. Bolivia has nationalized foreign corporations and initiated large-scale social welfare programs for Bolivia’s poor (60% are Quechua and Amayra speaking Indians). Morales maintains his popularity with his “Democratic Revolution” agenda in which wealth and power is transferred from Bolivia’s traditional White and Mestizo elites to the Andean Indian poor. Arguably more successful at sustaining itself than Venezuela, Morales has done so by collaborating with a diverse group of constituencies, all who have the potential to destabilize both Bolivia and the region.

In 2011, Morales and his Movement to Socialism (MAS) party forced the convening of a constitutional assembly to rewrite the constitution, which passed despite great opposition in 2013. While not “President for Life,” Morales has run unopposed in each re-election bid. He continues to govern through his power base among the labor unions to include his “Cocaleros” (Union of Coca Growers) and a coalition of radical nativist social movements, which were able to bring down two previous governments through violent strikes, protests, and demonstrations. Drug cartels operate freely in the ungoverned areas between Bolivia, Peru, and Brazil. The Proseguir insurgents are now operating on both sides of the Peru-Bolivia border, and reports indicate that Proseguir recruitment among Bolivia’s indigenous tribes is growing. Bolivian military patrols in these areas come under frequent ambush.

#### **Colombia**

Colombia’s forty-year civil war with the drug-fueled Marxist insurgency lessened in intensity after the historic peace agreement in 2016, but the country has yet to enjoy the hoped for stability and peace promised by the treaty. Now more of a drug cartel than Marxist-Leninist insurgency, the remnants of FARC, now called “Los Restos” (“The Remnants”), still in the field use safe havens in Venezuela to support operations. Government efforts to eradicate these “dead-enders” have resulted in more violence and instability, as the narco rich and ideologically unimpeded Restos sought to gain power and riches. Renewed bombing campaigns in Bogotá, Cali, and Medellin brought terror back to the streets, and these campaigns continue. Colombia’s population has grown weary of the protracted narco-war.

Venezuela blatantly ignores Colombian charges that they provide safe havens to the Restos, although their ability to resist Colombian incursions is limited. In 2019, supposed Venezuelan

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National Guard units clashed with pursuing Colombian Army units, resulting in several dead and wounded on both sides. Although Venezuela claimed its armed forces conducted this operation, intelligence reporting indicates that government involvement was minimal and cartel forces alerted to the incursion likely waged the battle. This deterioration of relations increased the tension over their disputed maritime border in the Gulf of Venezuela (known to be rich in oil reserves). The U.S. Government reported two U.S. Special Forces advisors missing in action in early March, 2025, after an ambush of a Colombian patrol in Aruca Province by Los Restos. Recent intelligence reporting indicates that Los Restos have detained the advisors at a government-sanctioned facility in Venezuela.

In April 2022, a chlorine device detonated in a movie theater in Cucuta, a city of nearly 600,000 on the Northwestern border with Venezuela. In the ensuing panic and stampede, forty people lost their lives and thirteen others were severely injured. Initial reporting failed to determine the responsible party, but indications were that an organization based in the ungoverned areas of Venezuela was the likely culprit. The President of the United States pledged assistance to the Colombian government to hunt down those responsible. Columbia refused the assistance, stating it would find the perpetrators, but to date no arrests have been made in relation to this incident.

#### **Ecuador**

President Holgar Vangoa, a close friend of former President Correa, faces powerful opposition from the media, traditional political parties, vested financial elites, and regional political interests from Guayaquil, the economic capital. Ecuador's population is more than 50% Quechua speaking Amerindian, a group that makes up the bulk of its poor and marginalized citizens. Ecuador is a modest exporter of oil, but lacks the proven reserves and infrastructure to develop a significant social safety net of other successful petro-states.

Vangoa, like his predecessor, identifies strongly with the plight of Ecuador's indigenous populations. Subsequently, the major political movements of these native people provide support to and rally behind him. Ecuador reacted sharply to Peru's mining activities along the disputed border, in large part due to the President's outrage over the displacement of Ecuadorian Indians. The Proseguir insurgents have been recruiting and arming people from the Ecuadorian tribes and have initiated attacks against Peruvian patrols and mining operations from bases within Ecuador.

#### **Peru**

The current Peruvian government, led by President Aduviri Donayre, a staunch U.S. ally, is a resource-rich, but ethnically divided and economically underdeveloped state in which democracy has struggled to take hold. Social inequality and regional disparities run very deep. Donayre is a right-of-center president who lacks a majority in Congress, and has so far sought alliances on the right. Opposition to Donayre's regime and civil unrest is fueled by the internal problems of growing poverty and rampant unemployment, crime and corruption fueled by increased coca cultivation, and the resurgence of a Maoist-Nativist based insurgency – the Proseguir. A splinter group of the old "Sendero Luminoso" (Shining Path), Proseguir, numbering 300-600 men, operates both in the high Andes and in Peru's Amazon jungle. Despite being a small force, it has managed to inflict damage on the country's military and police by resorting to hit-and-run ambushes of small convoys and patrols.

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The main international threat to Peru comes from potential spillover from the narco war in neighboring Colombia. There are official concerns over potential contacts between Los Restos and Proseguir, although the two groups have different ideological orientations. There have been unverified rumors of infiltration by Los Restos. Colombia's offensive against the guerrillas seems to have led to Los Restos using Peruvian (as well as Ecuadorean and Venezuelan) territory as a refuge. Colombia has actively pursued joint operations with Peru against drug and arms trafficking, illegal mining, and timber trafficking along the border. Peru does not have the military resources to match those of Colombia's military, but has placed additional troops in the Amazon border regions and will likely continue to collaborate closely with Colombia.

## **AFRICAN REGION**

### **Overview**

The most profound trend in Africa over the past two decades has been the increasing differentiation among African nations. Some African countries (such as Botswana and Mauritius) have achieved strong economic growth while a number of other countries are significantly poorer than they were when they gained independence. Some countries have established relatively well-functioning democracies (such as Ghana, Benin, and South Africa), while others suffer increased lawlessness and anarchy (large parts of Western and Central Africa). Finally, a few states have established a strong sense of national identity while others remain fractured by civil war.

Globalization has increased the divides among African countries. Those countries doing well have accessed an international economy that has readily accepted their goods. Technology has also allowed some better performing, well-governed African countries to overcome some of their development challenges (climate, geography, etc.) and join the global economy. At the same time, in those countries doing poorly, there has been a rise in anti-globalization efforts: transnational terrorism, illegal drug trade, and arms trafficking. Correspondingly, many of the governments of these less successful states exploit their own people and resources to sell goods (e.g., timber, diamonds) through a global "gray market" to willing buyers outside of international supervision – with the proceeds benefiting corrupt government officials and not the citizens.

Internal civil and social groups that pressure for democracy and responsible governance are not uniformly present across the continent. While some political and social reforms happened in northern Africa, they generally did not advance south of the Maghreb. These political reforms gave the average citizen a larger voice in government and more control of their daily lives, but the loosening of governmental control and power allowed insurgent and terrorist groups in the region to rebound – particularly AQIM, which has experienced a significant resurgence in the past 6 years. This resurgence, coupled with a growing "gray market" stretching from Western Africa through the Maghreb, accelerated developing ties among and between numerous terrorist organizations and elements of organized crime – to include drug traffickers exploiting transit pipelines into Europe.

The progress of most African nations in terms of their economic, political, and government performance has remained generally unchanged over the past 10 years. This phenomenon, in which local/national change lags significantly behind overall global change, is attributable to technological and communications deficits. In African nations, structural factors that greatly

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influence economic and political performance are non-existent or undeveloped. Coastal countries tend to have tremendous advantages, as compared to the landlocked countries of the Sahel and Central Africa. There is a group of African countries – which includes Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – so burdened by their extreme climate, water scarcity, related problems of health and disease, and challenging geographic position that all paths toward development are challenging and require innovative and multi-lateral solutions.

There is little doubt that some African economies will continue to profit from rising global demand for energy resources, minerals, food, arable land, and other natural resources. The continent boasts an abundance of riches, including 10% of the world's reserves of oil, 40% of its gold, and abundant reserves of chromium, platinum, and other rare metals. Demand for raw materials continues to expand in the world's emerging economies, and now account for half of Africa's total trade. As trade patterns have shifted, African governments have forged new types of economic partnerships, exchanging up-front foreign investment in infrastructure and technology for exclusive access to particular commodities. In this pattern, China and India have made significant investments in Africa and are viewed as *partners* by many African nations. In fact, Chinese development funds are responsible for over half of all infrastructure projects in Africa. Unfortunately these infrastructure improvements are suited towards facilitating Chinese access to natural resources and not necessarily to improve governance or economic prosperity of the average citizen. China and India continue to buy and lease enormous tracts of arable land across Africa in efforts to secure stable exports of food supplies for their nations. China's appetite for raw materials has moved some Chinese businesses to consider entertaining negotiations with African terror organizations like ATA to provide access to these materials in contested areas.

Over the past 50 years, much of the African continent has been ravaged by violent upheavals and natural and man-made disasters which have resulted in suffering and desolation of civilian populations on the scale not seen anywhere else in the world. In the last decade, 31 African nations have experienced large-scale violence and human suffering, brought on by causes ranging from war, revolution and terrorism to drought and famine. Exacerbating these factors is an ever-growing youth bulge in many countries. UN estimates show between 40 and 60 percent of certain populations being under the age of 25. Poor economic opportunity and lack of education have created a confluence of violence and suffering.

Also over this period, countries on the continent started to work together to form their own political, economic, and security cooperation institutions to solve conflicts. These regional organizations worked together with elements of both the UN and NATO, which provided economic assistance and agricultural and governmental training. Listed below are the major organizations of the continent and its sub-regions:

- The African Union (AU) is a confederation of 54 African nations as well as several inter-governmental organizations. Its primary objectives are to accelerate the political and socio-economic integration of the continent; to promote African positions on issues of common interest to the continent and its peoples; to achieve peace and security in Africa; and to promote democratic institutions, good governance, and human rights. In support of these objectives, the AU maintains a continental military force, the African Standby Force (ASF). The ASF is comprised of five brigades, organized by region, with both civilian and police

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components. Over the past decade, the AU has been involved in peacekeeping missions in Burundi, Sudan, Somalia, Zimbabwe, and Comoros. The AU is scheduled to take over for the United States and some coalition forces in Operation DESERT STRIKE beginning in May 2027, with complete hand-over of the operation scheduled for 31 December 2027. However, growing unrest between Sudan and South Sudan has begun to cast a shadow of doubt over this commitment.

- The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is an inter-governmental organization with a mission to promote sustainable and equitable economic growth and socio-economic development through deeper regional cooperation and integration, good governance, and durable peace and security. The goal is for the region to emerge as a competitive and effective player in international relations and the world economy. Member states of SADC are Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The SADC contributes a military brigade (Southern African Development Community Brigade [SADCBRIG]) to the ASF.
- The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional group of fifteen West African countries whose mission is to promote economic integration in “all fields of economic activity,” particularly: industry, transport, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, fiscal policy, and social and cultural matters. Member states include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. The ECOWAS peacekeeping activities have assisted in ameliorating human suffering in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire, and Guinea Bissau over the past two decades. The ECOWAS contributes one military brigade (ECOWAS Standby Force) to the ASF.

### Northern Africa

The social and economic development, from a series of landmark events, dramatically changed many nations in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region. While there were substantive effects on almost every Northern African nation, the revolutions that occurred in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt did not replicate in Algeria and Morocco.

Although social media savvy youth played an important role in driving the protests in most countries, their influence diminished as they lacked the organization, leadership, and policy platforms to continue to press their democratic agenda. As changes progressed in each country, more practical political maneuvering by traditional power brokers (primarily religious, secular, and tribal factions) drove the agendas. Islamist movements became emboldened in the post-uprising political landscape. Uneven results in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood won political power only to be overturned, and in Tunisia, where al-Nahda gained and held major political status, empowered Islamist leadership.

While the movement challenged regimes in the region, they initially served to benefit extremist groups. Governments with previously strong anti-terrorist records were weakened, removed, or distracted by the stability issues at hand. The result was a significant resurgence of extremist groups in Northern Africa, particularly AQIM in Algeria, Mali, and Mauritania, which exploited poor economic situations to recruit angry young men for their extremist movements.

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Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania experienced little disruption to core revenue and trade sectors (oil, mining, agriculture) and their economies rebounded, achieving a moderate 2-3% annual GDP growth rate. Unemployment moderated in the region through significant government expansion and social services programs. Libya and Tunisia, by contrast, saw sharp reductions in oil production, and a subsequent loss of trade. Continued uncertainty and frequent civil unrest and instability stymied internal development and foreign investment thereby creating fragile fiscal positions in these countries. Low growth and high unemployment were the results.

Long-term substantial economic and political reforms have not materialized and instability and unrest continue to trouble the region. A “second revolution” swept Northern Africa, beginning first in Algeria and spreading to Mauritania, Libya, and Tunisia. Like the initial uprisings, unemployed young people who felt marginalized by their governments led the second revolution. Unlike the original uprisings, extremist groups, particularly AQIM, were actively involved in the second revolution and the well-organized violence directed at governments and government institutions was on a much larger scale. In addition, there was widespread violence and civil unrest in Mali, Niger, and Chad. As in the Northwestern African countries, AQIM and other extremist groups were active in organizing and recruiting angry young citizens to lead the revolts against those governments.

Unfortunately, pervasive corruption, heavy regulation, and massive state subsidies that bent treasuries to the breaking point have burdened most countries in the region. By 2020, most governments struggled to maintain a delicate balance between tackling corruption and attracting foreign investment on one hand and maintaining political and civil stability on the other. The issue of food and fuel subsidies was particularly sensitive. These subsidies yielded immediate political benefits to the governments that distributed them, but they had negative long-term impacts on public finances and were unfairly administered because of corruption.

In early 2022, mounting debt and falling revenues forced many Northern African countries into large cuts to their civil service workforce. From March through June, almost 75,000 civil servants lost their jobs. In August 2022, young men aged 18-30 accounted for 74% of all the unemployed in Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Libya. Extremist groups leveraged the social unrest and pool of available workers to step up the violence against regional governments, exploiting the governments’ preoccupation with internal security and domestic unrest to grow unchecked and unopposed in the largely ungoverned spaces of Southern Algeria, and Northern Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. AQIM has developed a formidable organization, actively challenging the regimes of Northern Africa, particularly in Algeria and Mauritania.

#### **Sahel and Terror Links**

Large numbers of extremists and illicit activities affects the Sahel, including arms, drugs, and human trafficking. The region is known for porous borders and limited governmental control. Youth populations and unemployment continue to soar. Criminal networks increasingly overrun Central Sahel – the Fezzan in Libya’s south, Niger, and the Lake Chad Basin. Niger is relatively stable yet the government is ineffective in controlling outlying regions. To the south, the radical Islamist Boko Haram insurgency is responsible for deaths of thousands of civilians and the displacement of more than a million others. Counter-terrorism efforts have been insufficient and the nefarious activities continue to expand. Integrated approaches proposed by the EU and UN bore fruit initially but were overwhelmed over time. Without holistic, sustained action against



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entrenched criminal networks, misrule, and underdevelopment, instability is likely to spread and exacerbate radicalization. This trend, which along with deteriorating living conditions, malnutrition, and disease, has led to increased waves of migration.

#### **Algeria**

Conditions in the Maghreb grew increasingly turbulent in late 2021 and 2022. The wave of militant extremism reached a new intensity within Algeria. The re-emergence was due to extreme displeasure with public perception that the regime has been unwilling to implement political or economic reforms. AQIM still maintains its aim to overthrow the secular Algerian government and establish an Islamic state (as part of a larger Islamic Caliphate). AQIM has accused the United States of propping up the “apostate” Algerian regime and leading a crusade against Muslims. This rhetoric turned to action in May 2023 with the successful attacks in New York and New Jersey and on the Canadian embassy in Mauritania.

Algeria has been a silent member of the fight against AQIM in Operation DESERT STRIKE. The Algerian military has provided valuable intelligence and clandestine basing of coalition forces over the past 18 months. The Algerian government is aggressively fighting AQIM on its own, but must walk a fine line when cooperating with the coalition. Defeating AQIM is a key objective of the regime but publicly cooperating with the West would alienate and inflame an increasingly restless population.

#### **Libya**

After the revolution, Libya’s government dissolved into factions that vied for power. Libya’s ancient tribal structure and the vitriolic relationship between some of the tribes complicated the development of an effective governing body and therefore engulfed the country in chaos. The UN and the AU intervened to assist in negotiating a cease-fire among the warring factions. Through a two-year peace process, Libya was partitioned into three semi-autonomous regions based on tribal and historical divisions (Tripolitania in the northwest, Fezzan in the southeast, and Cirenaica in the east). The regions share oil revenues, support national armed forces and supply representatives to a national parliament, but generally develop and enforce regional laws.

Within each region, there are active separatist groups who seek to further partition Libya. Several of these groups in western Libya have collaborated with AQIM and have mounted an active anti-government insurgency in both Tripolitania and Fezzan. AQIM also uses bases in western Libya to mount an anti-government insurgency effort in Algeria. Libya’s relationship with the west is cordial. While not a part of the DESERT STRIKE coalition, Libya is conducting an aggressive, but ineffective, campaign to dislodge AQIM from their enclaves in the west of the country.

#### **Sudan/South Sudan**

Between 2015 and 2020, tensions between Sudan and South Sudan remained high but improved agricultural conditions alleviated some of the famine along their border. This relief, as well as the prospect of agricultural and energy sector employment resulted in the gradual return of many refugees to ancestral homelands. While the numbers of refugees remained in the hundreds of thousands throughout Sudan and her neighbors, in 2017 the UNHCR reported that the humanitarian crisis had “turned the corner toward recovery.”

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The situation in South Sudan devolved into a civil war because the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) split along ethnic lines. Their civil war saw thousands killed and over a million displaced. A humanitarian crisis quickly developed which threatened tens of thousands with famine and starvation. A prolonged peace effort by the UN and the AU saw a series of cease-fires between factions and peace conferences in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, which finally resulted in a compromise agreement and roadmap to power sharing in South Sudan.

Tragically, in 2022, drought conditions returned across Darfur and the border region of Sudan. A ten-day sand and dust storm in July 2022 virtually wiped out the entire season's agricultural crop and killed over 80% of the region's livestock. The rapid deterioration of the situation resulted in a resurgence of violence fueled by long-suppressed tribal and regional hatred. Almost overnight, militia groups, criminals, and marauding bands of young men began prowling the countryside on the southern side of the border, foraging for supplies and committing atrocities on refugees. Eventually, many of the groups began staging raids north across the border into the Republic of the Sudan. In response, Sudan mobilized a significant portion of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) to patrol along the border with the South Sudan provinces.

In October 2022, ethnic tensions in South Sudan once again flared up as former SPLA separatists declared a split from the "impotent" Government of South Sudan (GoSS) and established an 'alternate state' in the Jonglei and Upper Nile (A'ali an Nil) provinces. The separatists, dominated by members of the Dinka tribal faction, forced the Nuer, Berta, and Burum tribal groups to support their armed struggle, mostly through intimidation and brutal acts of terror. To support the defeat of the Khartoum agenda, they initiated acts of sabotage against oil fields and pipelines in the area and conducted guerrilla raids into the White Nile and Blue Nile regions, mostly against Muslim villages. All efforts by the GoSS to bring this faction under their control have proven futile to this point.

The leaders of the now-named People's Liberation Movement of South Sudan (PLMSS) viewed themselves as the vanguard for full control by South Sudan of all their lands and resources and called on the rest of the southern tribes and populace to join their cause. They established their 'true government of independent South Sudan' in the city of Kigille and an insurgent base camp in the Boma National Park region. These sites also allow them to cross into remote regions of western Ethiopia (the Gambela National Park region) with impunity.

The Khartoum regime moved to apply pressure on the GoSS to control the lawlessness and chaos, but the GoSS was incapable of dealing with the continued unrest. Finally, in February 2023, two divisions of the SAF moved south to occupy positions on the disputed border. The Sudanese Air Force increased the number of flights into South Sudan under the guise of 'reconnaissance.'

Throughout the spring of 2023, the Janjaweed Militia and the outcast South Sudanese Defense Force increased attacks against various NGOs, UN humanitarian and refugee camps in South Sudan, and humanitarian convoys, resulting in the collapse of several camps and feeding centers in Darfur and the southern and eastern regions of Sudan. This left the relief agencies little choice but to collapse its workers into 'protection zones,' with the UN and the GoSS attempting to establish a wider buffer zone of security around them.

For its part, the Khartoum regime continued to express indifference, appearing confident that the deteriorating situation in South Sudan would lead the nation to eventually collapse, opening the

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way to consolidate power and regain control of its resources. Many in the western intelligence agencies were also convinced the government of Chad was in collusion with Khartoum.

In a brazen move in the summer of 2024, armed groups and rival tribal factions, suspected of being under Sudanese control, began assassinating police and killing soldiers in both the AU/UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) and the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Border monitors soon began to detect an increased flow of illicit arms from the Central African Republic and Chad along with foreign fighters, presumed to be operating under AQ affiliates.

In November of 2024, vehicular IEDs destroyed several South Sudanese government offices in Juba. Investigations supported by a U.S. FAST (Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team) and the FBI, in cooperation with the GoSS, revealed evidence of AQ operatives working in consort with armed rogue groups. Information was uncovered confirming lines of communication and a facilitation network extending from Somalia, and through northern Kenya, into South Sudan in the eastern Equatoria province and revealed a new strategy by the AQ in the Horn of Africa (AQHA). AQHA is targeting western petroleum companies and energy infrastructure to stress world oil production and inflate prices as part of their economic and political warfare strategy against the West. In response, the GoSS appears incapable of deploying an effective infrastructure protection force. Several Western companies have hired private security and paramilitary forces but they are not sufficient to prevent a catastrophic attack.

By June of 2025, border incidents involving minor combat and the trading of tank and artillery fire between the SAF and SPLA were common. The Government of Sudan seized vast areas south of the international border in the Northern Bahr El Ghazal province and forced the removal of the UN monitoring forces. In reaction, the GoSS appealed to the UN Security Council for assistance to resolve the ongoing aggression of Khartoum, to intervene and provide forces to assist in reasserting stability and security across its provinces, and to restore the recognized international border. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 3154 on 2 February 2025, calling for a return to the provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), restoration of the demarcation line, and the return of all forces to the status quo of 2020.

As a result of this move, the Alliance of Revolutionary Forces of West Sudan – comprised of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM), and seven other rebel organizations in the Darfur region – joined together to create an autonomous region in western Sudan. They pledged their support to the GoSS in defiance of Khartoum in part due to their dissatisfaction with Sudan's President Bashir's refusal to negotiate with them. The U.S. administration supports UN efforts to establish peace and security throughout all of Sudan.

#### **Mali**

Following coup attempts and multiple ineffective governments in 2011-2015 a UN-led peacekeeping force (MINUSMA) comprised largely of ECOWAS troops maintained a weak peace. The French established a persistent counter-terrorism reaction and training force (Operation BARKHANE) across the Sahel composed of 3,000 troops deployed to Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Niger. The MINUSMA was terminated in late 2018. Operation BARKHANE ended in 2018 as well. A democratic, pro-western government was restored and former Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was re-elected to a second term in 2018. Cheick Modibo Diarra succeeded Keïta in October 2024.

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Mali is a member of the U.S.-led coalition to fight AQIM, however, a significant number of civilian casualties in September 2024 caused the government to scale-back its support and demand a significant reduction in foreign-led operations within Mali in November 2024. The government further insisted that Malian forces lead all operations in Mali. With coalition support, Mali continues its aggressive pursuit of AQIM.

#### **Mauritania**

So far, in the 21st century, the government has wavered from fledgling democracy to military dictatorship and back again. AQIM took advantage of these internal power struggles and gained control over vast areas of the interior to set up bases across the northern part of the country as well as infiltrate south into the city of Zouerat and the area around Ouadane near the Er Richat plateau. The terrorists who conducted the attacks on the Lincoln Tunnel and the Canadian Embassy trained and prepared at these bases.

The current democratic government came to power through popular elections held in 2018, the first since April 2007. The President, Messoud Ould Boulkheir, is very pro-Western and pro-U.S. in his national and international policies. He has moved quickly to re-establish democratic norms within his nation. However, rebuilding the military has been a long-term challenge, as his government sees the need to build a completely new generation of leaders. Internal security forces continue to develop into a professional organization.

Mauritania, a member of the coalition fighting AQIM, has taken an active role in operations. Almost 50,000 coalition troops are stationed in Mauritania for Operation DESERT STRIKE. In retribution, AQIM has waged an extremely violent terrorist campaign in Mauritania and is conducting an open insurgency against President Boulkheir's government. In 2024 alone, almost 1,300 kidnappings and killings in the coastal cities were credited to AQIM, causing widespread public alarm and placing the government in a much-weakened position.

#### **Somalia**

Despite a variety of internal and international efforts, little progress has been made toward establishing a unifying government in Somalia. Rival clans throughout the South continue to feud for territorial control, and all vestiges of a central government have disappeared. The last two "elected" congresses were subject to deadly terrorist attacks. Since the assassination of Prime Minister Dalmar Asad in August of 2023, there has been no formal government or national leadership in Somalia. In desperation, Somaliland declared itself independent of Somalia. Somaliland had emerged from the earliest parts of the 21st century by establishing a relatively peaceful and orderly society. Puntland, to the east, has also had some success in creating stability, but has not followed Somaliland's lead for independence. Puntland leaders have cited loyalty to greater Somalia and thus have committed themselves to continue to strive for a just, sovereign and united Somalia under democratic rule.

Throughout the rest of Somalia, lawlessness has continued to thrive. One aspect changed dramatically in 2019, when an AQ related group botched a pirate attack against a Norwegian flagged cruise ship SS NORWEGIAN PEARL. The attack went awry when a detonation in the engine room sunk the ship in less than 20 minutes. Of the 1,300 passengers and crew, 817 perished in the accident, with the survivors rescued by a passing Chinese tanker.

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This resulted in the European Community conducting a three-month campaign of air and cruise missile attacks on the pirate camps and facilities throughout greater Somalia under the European Defense Initiative (EDI). European special operations teams conducted surgical strikes against headquarters compounds and training areas. These operations by Germany, France, and Norway resulted in the relentless prosecution of the pirate trade in the HOA. The EDI task force effectively suppressed piracy in the HOA, with incidences dropping from an average of 112 attempts per year to just three unsuccessful attempts reported in 2021. While the EDI task force returned home in 2021, most EDI members have authorized their Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) HOA units to conduct preventive strikes at the first sign of any new pirate activity. Maritime crime in the HOA region is now at the lowest levels since the 1980s.

#### **Ethiopia**

Ethiopia announced their plan to begin construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam, a project that has been on the drawing board since the mid-1950s. Located on the Blue Nile River about 40km east of the border with Sudan, the 6000 MW gravity dam will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa. Currently, the dam is complete and the reservoir filling process has begun. That process could take anywhere from six to 10 years. Once filled, the reservoir will be one of the largest on the continent. The potential impacts of the dam have been the source of regional controversy – particularly in Egypt where 99% of the Egyptian population resides in the Nile River Valley or Delta.

Despite outcries from Egypt accompanied by threats of military action against the dam, Egypt lacked the political influence or military capability to prevent construction. Construction, originally scheduled for completion by late 2017, ran into trouble throughout the decade. Significant drought and high temperatures created working conditions that were extremely difficult and hazardous; progress during these years slowed significantly, putting the project behind schedule by two years. Additionally, two unclaimed acts of sabotage against the building project – one in 2018 and again in 2020 – each set the construction back another one to two years. While there was no claim of responsibility Ethiopia alleged that Egypt was behind the attacks, though there was never any conclusive evidence produced to support the allegations.

#### **Kenya**

After decades of battling crop failures due to wheat rust, the Kenyan government has identified three fungicide-resistant strains of Ug99, a wheat crop destroying fungus. Progress in combating Ug99 was semi-successful until 2021. Another rash of crop failures began occurring across Kenya. The over use of fungicides that reduced the effects of earlier Ug99 strains resulted in the three new strains. As these new strains spread, the threat to Uganda and Ethiopian wheat fields increased. The impact of Ug99 spreading to other wheat-producing nations is highly likely due to increased globalization. Scientists believe that 80% or more of the world's wheat crop could be lost if these strains are not stopped.

#### **Congo and Central African Region**

With almost no violence or border disputes between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Republic of the Congo (RC), and Rwanda in the past decade, the Congo River has become a major thoroughfare for developers, missionaries, and relief organizations.

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Governmental and non-governmental agencies have made significant progress improving access to good water, stabilizing food sources, and improving overall health among many of the tribal groups in RC, DRC, Rwanda and the Central African Republic. In both the AU and the UN, optimism about a peaceful and prosperous Congo Region has been growing.

In early 2025, superstition-filled rumors of a terrible illness began to circulate among the native crews of boats that worked the waters of the Congo. While unknown in origin, tales of rapid onset, prolonged fevers, and a high mortality rate fueled fears that a new and dangerous epidemic was taking hold along the upper waters of the Congo.

In 2026, World Health Organization investigative team spent three months in the region without reaching a hard conclusion. While they could find no one suffering from any new illness, Catholic missionaries took the team to several villages burned and abandoned by fleeing villagers. Their report described the level of fear in the area and concern evidenced by fresh graves and razed villages in the hinterlands of the Congo River, recommending that the UN continue to monitor the area for further developments.

## **ASIA-PACIFIC REGION**

### **Overview**

Economic growth throughout the Pacific Rim has not been constrained by the resource intense competition among the key powers, especially China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, India, and Taiwan. General economic prosperity throughout the region allowed most nations to expand their armed forces, improve their economic standards, and take a more active role in the world.

There is evidence that links terrorist groups in South and Southeast Asia over the last decade, and that over the past few years these terrorist organizations have built new training bases in remote areas of Southeast Asia. In particular, terrorist activity in the Strait of Malacca (SOM) poses a serious threat to the security of shipments through the area.

India and China are significant consumers in world energy markets. China, in particular, has expanded production of shale gas, but economic growth has outstripped the domestic production in both countries. However, in the case of China, under the terms of a 2014 natural gas deal, Russia has continued to provide 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year, with the option to expand up to 60 billion cubic meters per year. The agreement enabled Russia to build a 4000 kilometer-long (~2,500 miles) pipeline from two new Siberian source fields into China.

Following the India-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) free trade agreement signing in July 2009, India and Vietnam expanded their relationship. This included strengthened military ties, and increased business relationships. An example being Indian heavy industry being a preferred supplier of oilfield services for Vietnamese production in the South China Sea (SCS). Recognizing the importance of energy to India, the United States has expanded opportunities for collaboration on energy generation and infrastructure on the subcontinent. Ongoing economic prosperity is closing the gap between India's urban upper and middle classes and those mired in rural and urban poverty.

In Southeast Asia, international disputes over water resources are hotly contested, especially in the long river basins, as those downstream are denied water by new users upstream. Since 2011 there have been several incidents in which the Chinese and Japanese Coast Guard and fishing

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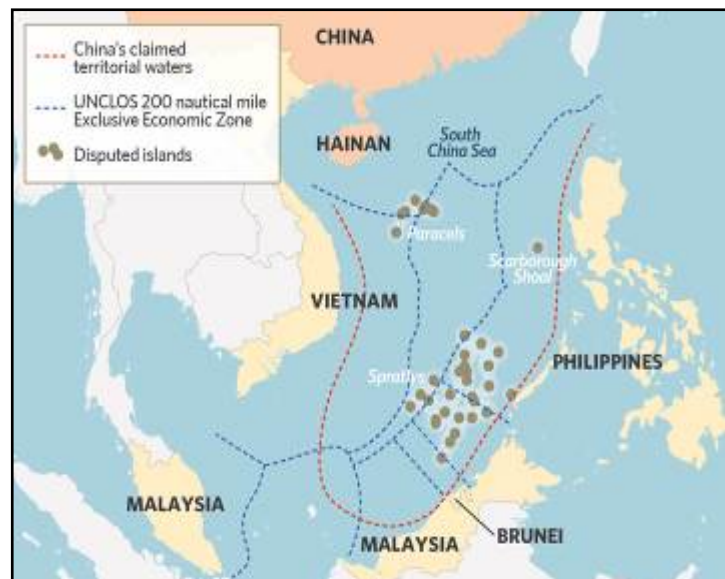
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survey vessels damaged, detained, or captured the other nation's vessels. The countries exchanged diplomatic protests, and then repatriated the mariners involved. However, as the Chinese economy stalled, Beijing aggressively sought to increase oil production and fishing in the Diayou/Senkaku Islands area.

There has been little success in peacefully resolving Asian territorial disputes, despite encouragement from the international community. The most notable disputes are among China, Taiwan, and Japan concerning the East China Sea (ECS) Senkaku/Diayou islands, several Southeast Asian nations and the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the SCS.

In the SCS, control of the Spratly Islands is under dispute between China, Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The disputed areas contain large undersea energy reserves. In July 2016, the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration handed down its award on the 2013 case brought by the Philippine government over Chinese claims in the South China Sea. In an unexpectedly wide-ranging decision, the court denied the maritime claims of both China and Taiwan to their expressed rights within the SCS, found Beijing in violation of Philippine sovereign rights within their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and further, that the 'island building' projects undertaken by Beijing had caused severe damage to SCS coral reef environments. They noted that none of the Spratly Islands met the definition of landforms as specified in the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and thus China and Taiwan's claims were invalid; specifically, that China's self-declared "rights were extinguished to the extent that they were incompatible with the [EEZs] provided for in the convention." As expected, Beijing rejected the court's decision as invalid and pledged to ignore it, while Taipei found it completely unacceptable. Yet Beijing's overall response remained relatively restrained; there were no major military confrontations, they did not declare an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Sea, and they did not withdraw from UNCLOS.

However, over the intervening years, China's activities within the SCS and the Spratly Islands have proceeded unabated. The Philippines lost the opportunity in the years after 2016 to defend the UNCLOS decision. China has continued their program of creating new land out of atolls in both the Spratly and Paracel Islands, China has increased its continuous military and civilian presence on over a dozen manmade islands in the SCS. Vietnam and the Philippines both fought skirmishes with China in 2019, 2023, and 2026 over access to the Chinese claimed area of the SCS. Chinese Coast Guard and fishing enforcement vessel



patrols continue to take aggressive actions to drive out Vietnamese and Filipino fishing fleets from prime fishing locations, such as Scarborough Shoal, off the west coast of the Philippines. China has been aggressively enforcing sovereign rights over territorial claims and has announced

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its intention to begin resource development, beginning in 2027 with the operation of an unspecified number of drill ships in contested waters. Vietnam and the Philippines continue to lead the international protest at China's failure to settle the disputes in accordance with the (UNCLOS) process and fears have developed that those protests may escalate if the international community takes no action.

China and Japan have a strong economic relationship, strengthened by increased Japanese dependence on Chinese manufacturing and guest labor following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. However, in recent years relations between both nations in the political, military, and public spheres have come under increased stress. A mixture of heightened pride, self-confidence, and sense of historical grievance fueled nationalism on both sides.

Regional seaborne trade is the lifeline of the region, much of it passing through the SOM, an important, but narrow and crowded sea line of communication (SLOC). In response to increased piracy, many of the regional powers, most notably China with their People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), have expanded their presence into the SOM to conduct anti-piracy patrols. Since 2023, China has maintained a permanent "refueling" base in Myanmar, and established a "Southern Ocean Fleet" headquarters to oversee operations in the Indian Ocean. However, the permanent Chinese presence has had only a limited effect on curtailing piracy.

China's increased assertiveness on the world stage since their revised military strategy in 2015 has seen an increase in the number and duration of Chinese excursions out of the western Pacific. Exports of conventional military hardware, technological developments, and robust space-based assets have made China a regional "super power" and near peer competitor with the United States. Since 2020, Chinese investment has generally been accompanied by military engagement.

Japan is being drawn in opposing directions. Economically, Japan has shown increasing independence from the United States since it fared well in its anticipation of and preparation for the 2020 Asian downturn, coupled with expanding trade with China. On defense matters, however, Japan began to rely much more on its relationship with the United States, and increased its interaction with Australia. Japan increased its reliance on American forces, and, despite objections on the home islands, allowed the United States to increase its presence at existing bases. Japan's investment in defense forces dwindled as national assets were dedicated towards rebuilding after the devastating disasters that befell the nation in 2011.

On the Korean Peninsula, the Republic of Korea has continued to be an economic success, consolidating many of its leads in heavy industry, and emerging as a strong player in consumer electronics. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is still a closed and secretive society; however, there are indications of a rift between the Kim dynasty, who are showing secret diplomatic signs of openness to the Republic of Korea, and the military leadership of the DPRK, who have been leveraging China to increase their internal power. The DPRK has slowly been building up network attacking and exploitation capabilities while the world assumed the nation without the internet was at a major disadvantage. These capabilities can pose a more likely threat than that of nuclear warheads.

#### **China**

Since the mid-2000s, Chinese politicians have been able to modernize the country and liberalize the economy while maintaining centralized political control. Over the last decade, however,



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China's middle class has become more vocal on issues of political reform and openness as growth has slowed. Widening economic disparities between social groups, ethnic tensions, and crime are becoming more important to political leaders. Many are pointing to the successes in Hong Kong and Macau and suggesting that allowing more local control could help in addressing local problems.

China possesses the world's largest economy, and is a leading regional military power. It is also the largest importer of natural resources, and the biggest polluter. Many economists tie the Chinese economic slowdown to the increased cost for Chinese labor relative to poorer countries, which caused global production facilities to relocate from China to countries with cheaper labor pools. Prosperity is driving increased energy demand and higher prices nationwide; however, wages among Chinese workers are failing to keep up with higher prices.

In 2015, China published its first public military strategy. Following the strategy, China has spent a decade pursuing secure sea-lanes from the SCS to the Middle East. There are still portions of those SLOCs, such as the SOM bottleneck, that the Chinese government views as vulnerable to hostile threats. While most of the Chinese navy's expanding fleet of sophisticated warships and submarines are designed to defend their "historical claims" against all interlopers, Beijing has also focused on building an expeditionary capability in order to project air and sea power from the mainland and Hainan Island beyond the SCS into the Western Pacific. In addition to their permanent base in Myanmar, China has arrangements with Pakistan and Madagascar to maintain "fueling stations." This has allowed a small but capable expeditionary force to operate continuously west of the SOM since 2019.

China has vigorously enforced its unilateral claims to the Spratly and Paracel Islands, ignoring ASEAN negotiated boundaries, and insisting on settling border disputes with countries individually. Conflicting claims over these islands in the SCS have led to recurring tensions between China and the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, generally through confrontations with Chinese fisheries enforcement, geologic survey, and Coast Guard vessels operating in areas where the smaller country's claimed EEZs intersect with the Chinese nine-dashed line claim.

Following the discovery of huge oil reserves estimated to be in excess of 17 billion barrels in the Spratly Islands, China developed an indigenous offshore and deep-sea oil drilling capability and has periodically sent drill ships to perform test borings despite protests from other SCS-claimant nations. The Chinese claim not only the Spratly Islands but also 85% of the SCS, outlined by their "nine-dashed line." In support of such a massive claim, the Chinese reference 2,000-year-old maps and a favorable reading of the UNCLOS. In diplomatic communiqués, China claims the SCS is a "core interest" for their nation – raising the significance of the SCS to the same level as Taiwan and Tibet – suggesting an aggressive and provocative approach.

Energy has been a source of contention between China and India. They are two of the world's fastest growing energy consumers, with China importing about 40% of its energy needs and India 70%. China has consistently outmaneuvered and outbid India over energy resources. As India reaches into the Malacca Strait and assists in asserting Vietnam's claims in the SCS, Beijing is developing strategic port facilities in Sittwe (Myanmar), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Hambantota, and Gwadar (Pakistan) to protect sea-lanes and ensure uninterrupted energy supplies. India is wary of China's efforts to engage and entangle other South Asian nations in military and economic matters.

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China and Japan are in competition for energy supplies and fishing grounds, risking direct confrontation in and around the ECS. Some progress was made in 2018, with the signing of an ECS development cooperation agreement. However, Tokyo withdrew from the agreement in 2024, citing new Chinese oil and gas field development in the ECS. Japan claims Chinese oil companies are extending oil wells through transverse drilling into agreed Japanese oil exploration and production areas.

Japan outbid China to secure distribution of Russian oil to the Pacific Ocean through the Perevoznyaya Bay oil terminal in Nakhodka. Pipeline construction began in April 2019; however, planned completion was delayed until 2028 due to cost overruns and internal Russian politics. Japanese nationalists claim that Chinese investment in LNG terminals and ships to transport fossil fuels along the North Sea Route worked to sabotage Japan's earlier agreement.

China uses its strategic partnerships with various resource rich countries in Central Asia to win oil concessions in attempts to secure resource supplies and grow its export market. Even Western companies have been willing to collaborate with China on development of oil resources around the globe due to China's large cash reserves.

China's foreign policy has enabled Beijing to reinforce relations with authoritarian governments such as Myanmar, Sudan, Venezuela, and Iran. The Myanmar government raised China to the status of 'Elder Brother.' China has parlayed these earlier inroads into an active role in maintaining Myanmar stability, promoting reconciliation among ethnic groups, and expanding foreign relations for the Myanmar government. This has promoted a Chinese migration into the under-populated northern areas of Myanmar resulting in 30% of the historic city of Mandalay's population being Chinese immigrants. Unlike the ethnic Indian communities that languish as second-class citizens under Myanmar citizenship laws, China has managed to convince leaders in Myanmar to grant ethnic Chinese immigrants dual citizenship status.

China appears to be interested in over-land access to the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea through Myanmar, allowing for the development of infrastructure to bypass the SOM. China has underwritten the development of roads from northern borders to the southern coastal areas of Myanmar. In 2020, China began construction of oil and gas pipelines more than 1,200 miles long, from Kyaukpyu Port in Arakan State on the Bay of Bengal, through Myanmar, to southwest China. Completion of construction, scheduled for 2024, had repeated delays. Currently, China plans to open the pipeline in early 2029. The delay brought increased pressure to secure oil resource. The project includes railway, road and waterway construction, as well as upgrading the port at Kyaukpyu. As part of the pipeline project, China has secured a 30-year deal from the Myanmar's government for sole access to natural gas produced off the Myanmar coast. Analysts believe that China will also use the pipelines and port facilities in Kyaukpyu to import natural gas and oil from the Middle East and Africa, significantly reducing the amount of energy shipped through the SOM.

China, with cooperation from the government of Myanmar, is modernizing its naval bases at Haingyi, the Coco Islands, Akyab, Za Det Kyi, Mergui, and Khaukphyu by building radar, refit and refuel facilities to support Chinese surface, submarine, and air operations in the region. Intelligence suggests that Myanmar has allowed China to build and operate four electronic listening posts.

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In 2019, Beijing approached Bangkok about building a \$20 billion canal across the Isthmus of Kra to bypass the SOM. Bangkok refused the offer, publicly citing sensitivities to internal concerns about environmental impact and the social cost of relocating residents as justification.

In 2018, China and Bangladesh completed a joint venture to build a container port facility at Chittagong funded by Beijing. Beijing has worked to increase its influence in the Middle East as the United States has been drawing down its presence following wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. China maintains a presence at the Gwadar deep-water port facility in Pakistan, which became operational in 2008. China has also become one of Iran's key trading partners, with Iran providing 30% of Chinese oil imports.

China continues to purchase advanced military systems from Russia. Extensive testing of advanced anti-ship ballistic missiles indicates that China's focus is on anti-access and area denial within its perceived sphere of influence. The Chinese military is also focusing on logistics support, specifically aerial refueling, to more efficiently project Chinese military power. China has continued to address shortcomings in long-range lift, logistic, and air support to project their amphibious forces. China has trained an operational naval air wing on its refurbished Russian aircraft carrier, and has deployed an indigenously produced carrier fully equipped for operational missions. China is projected to possess at least three fully operational aircraft carriers and four air refueling squadrons by 2030. China's naval aviation aircraft are indigenous models. Conventional military modernization has occurred in all branches of the PLA, including improved stealth capabilities, vertical takeoff and 5th generation fighters, counter-stealth radar technologies, advanced electronic warfare techniques, and aerial refueling.

China's ability to conduct combined operations has significantly increased. For example, in June 2026, destroyers, frigates, and auxiliary ships from the North Sea Fleet (based in Qingdao) passed through the Bashi Strait between the Philippines and Taiwan to conduct a major "confrontation exercise" in the SCS. A few days later, guided missile destroyers, frigates, and submarines from the East Sea Fleet (based in Ningbo) passed through Japan's Miyako Strait without notifying Tokyo and conducted anti-submarine warfare exercises in the Pacific waters southeast of Japan. There have been reports of naval aviators from several bases in the Nanjing and Guangzhou military regions conducting long-range exercises that incorporated radar jamming, night flying, mid-air refueling, and simulated bombing runs in the SCS.

China hopes that its military strength and newfound diplomatic and economic relationships will facilitate a greater leadership role in the region and within international organizations. Many Chinese leaders believe that the United States has prevented China from taking its rightful place in the world as a modern, powerful country. They believe Washington's support of South Korea and Japan, arms sales to Taiwan and deployment of regional missile defense systems are all aimed at denying China's emergence as a regional power. China continues limited work with the North Korean military to improve the DPRK's mobile missile launcher technology; however, the Chinese/North Korean relationship is strained. Direct military ties between the PRC and the DPRK were suspended following an incident in 2019 where the North Korea sunk a South Korean ship, prompting a UN demand that China stop aiding the North Korean military. Full diplomatic relations between the DPRK and the PRC were restored in 2021, three years into another North Korean famine, but officials at all levels remain at arms-length. There are

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indications that the Chinese government sees a strong and reactionary North Korea as more of a liability to South Korea and Japan than to China.

China is developing a laser technology capability and has several ground-based laser facilities that experts assess as capable to attack satellite systems in low earth orbit. China completed a number of technology and multilateral corporate agreements that gave the Chinese Space Agency controlling interest in several international communication and space-centric businesses. Several European nations have sold high-tech, militarily useful technology to China as part of these agreements over the objection of the U.S. government.

China has experienced challenging domestic issues. An increase in district and province-level decision-making authority raised public expectation of further political liberalization. However, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to maintain a tight rein on national policy, particularly concerning issues of national security.

Much of China's economy remains controlled by large state-owned enterprises (SOE). The SOE sector covers about 70% of the labor and capital employed in Chinese industry. However, the SOE sector only generates about 40% of the output due to the inefficiency of SOE management and some outright graft. There is minimal incentive for SOE management to adopt best available management practices or most appropriate/most efficient technological solutions, as this would come at the expense of the political class.

China has sold some smaller SOEs to Western businesses with the goal of importing some their expertise. As foreign companies take advantage of China's willingness to expand, a lack of transparency and government interference plague business negotiations. For example, following the recent breakdown in negotiations between Chinese owned Baosteel and British-Australian owned BHP Billiton, China perceived itself as "losing face" in the international market. In retaliation, China raised bribery allegations against BHP Billiton and detained several steel executives on spy charges. Such practices and continued government involvement in business deals has created hesitation in foreign investors' business dealings with China.

Limited outlets for expressing dissenting opinion or electing leaders outside the established CCP have led to increased violence by dissident political groups, termed "internal terrorist organizations" by the CCP. The Chinese government has accused these groups of inciting the public and of being responsible for civil unrest. Two groups in particular have increased their level of public dissent in the past decade, the Tibetan Buddhists and the Uighur Muslims. Both have been targets of the Chinese leadership's "Sinicizing" plan for decades. According to this plan, over time the government resettles significant numbers of Han Chinese into each region to dilute the indigenous ethnic populations. Beijing stepped up resettlement operations by coupling them with major infrastructure projects such as a rail line into Tibet and a pipeline into Xinjiang. Both groups reacted to Beijing's efforts by rallying and organizing opposition efforts. In the case of the Uighurs, this has led to a growth of Islamic nationalist movements in Xinjiang, buoyed by the Arab Spring and the success of ISIS.

China's strategy to maintain control in Tibet has moderated in recent years. In the past, Beijing's aim was to marginalize the Dalai Lama and Buddhist influence in Tibet. Now China is focused on securing the watersheds located in the Himalayas of Tibet – the Buddhist issue is just peripheral. Chinese crackdowns in Tibet are increasing Sino-India border tensions. Tibet is the source for the major rivers that supply Pakistan, north and northeastern India, Myanmar, and

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Vietnam. Six major Asian rivers flow from the Tibetan plateau – the Indus, Mekong, Brahmaputra, Salween, Yangtze, and Yellow. China has built several hydroelectric plants on these rivers over the past five years in order to export electricity and water without prior negotiations with downstream countries. The other countries in the region have expressed concern over perceived threats to the availability of adequate supplies of drinking water.

Tensions between China and Taiwan eased between 2008 and 2018, but progress stalled when Taiwan signed an economic development treaty with India in 2018 as a part of India's "Look East" policy. Since then pro-independence parties in Taiwan have grown considerably, though pro-reconciliation parties currently control the country. Chinese leaders fear that enhanced political, economic and military ties with India may embolden Taiwan to declare independence. China continues to assert that a Taiwanese independence declaration would prompt a military response. Following strong speculation that Taiwan approached India to support a Taiwanese recognition initiative in the UN General Assembly, China announced its intent to advance its biennial joint force exercise to the spring of 2028, a year earlier than scheduled. The PLA's exercise will include air, sea, and land forces. The PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson indicated there would be a need to close portions of the Taiwan Strait during the exercise to reduce potential hazards to non-participating traffic. Several reports from senior Chinese officials indicate that China is considering the establishment of what they call a Maritime Operating Zone (MOZ) in the Taiwan Strait requiring shipping in the strait to be coordinated through the PLAN.

Improved U.S. relations with India, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are indicative to some in China of a possible U.S. containment strategy. The United States/Japan Security Treaty, in particular, is seen as evidence of a continuing U.S. commitment to an independent Taiwan, as is the increased Japanese and South Korean cooperation with the Taipei government. New basing agreements with the Philippines, an expansion of American military exercise programs with the armed forces of the ASEAN states, and the revival of the Australia, New Zealand, and United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty, have also reinforced this perception. Fearing containment, China's attitude toward the United States has become increasingly unfriendly in the UN and most other international fora.

#### **Japan**

Japan is a stable democracy and has the world's fourth largest national economy. Economic prosperity continues, the result of five decades of near-continuous growth in the post-WWII period, despite epic disasters, and aided by continuity in governance and security guarantees from the United States. Japan rebounded from the devastating effects of the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactor meltdown. Strong public support for rebuilding and a relaxation on "guest labor" (foreign residence visas for immigrant workers) have had a positive effect. However, decreased agricultural output from Fukushima Prefecture contributed to Japan's increased reliance on food imports.

Japan continues to face a number of external security threats. The evolution of North Korea into a nuclear state with advanced delivery vehicles has greatly increased anxiety over Japanese fallout from any confrontation on the Korean peninsula. In recent months, Japan and the United States cautiously and quietly facilitated negotiations between the Republic of Korea and the DPRK, specifically with members of the North Korean Kim regime. These highly secretive negotiations remain unacknowledged by any of the nations involved.

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In the past, student-led riots and attacks by communist revolutionaries troubled Japan's internal stability. However, none has proven an enduring or substantial threat to the state. The most significant internal challenge is demographic change, as an aging society places strain on pension systems and the population declines during sluggish long-term economic growth.

Some politicians in Japan urge reduced dependence on U.S. influence (i.e., seeking greater parity in the U.S./Japan security relationship). The rearrangement of Japanese priorities following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami have pushed Japan to garner American assistance to fend off an increasingly aggressive China, allowing Japan to focus on internal investment. The rapid economic and military development of China created the perception in Japan that its historical rival could become a strategic military competitor. In order to free itself to act, a reinterpretation of the peace article in the Japanese constitution allowed the passage of several defense reform laws in Japan, allowing more frequent overseas military deployments. Polls suggest that the Japanese public considers that Japan has paid its debt to the world for the Second World War and should be allowed to develop offensive military capabilities. In practice, overall reductions in defense spending have limited new deployments.

One exception is a force modeled after the U.S. Marine Corps dedicated to the defense of remote islands in southwestern Japan amid the rapid modernization of China's military. The force was created by reorganizing the Ground Self-Defense Force's 8th Division, based in Kumamoto, and infantry regiments of the 15th Brigade on Okinawa. In the 2014 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), the Defense Ministry described defense of the remote islands as a crucially important duty of the Self Defense Force. The 2022 NDPG showed a shift in Japan's defense policy from the Cold War-era Soviet threat to a potential Chinese threat that could deploy a modernized military, assault craft and paratroops.

Tokyo is concerned about the possibility of a direct confrontation with Beijing over the Senkaku Islands in the ECS. Japan has long been a net energy importer. Japan's reliance on imported energy has only increased since the nation began shifting away from nuclear energy following the Fukushima-Daiichi power plant meltdown in March 2011. Despite repeated attempts, most of Japan's nuclear power stations remain shuttered, and the development of geothermal and tidal energy production facilities remains a source of political contention in Japan.

The United States has increased military presence on Okinawa (Ryukyu Island). In 2020, Japan and the United States renegotiated the 2006 United States-Japan Roadmap for Realignment Implementation agreement, allowing continued use of Okinawa by the United States. The decrease in Japanese and American defense spending has led Japan to take a more pragmatic approach to regional security issues.

#### **North Korea**

Decades of natural disasters and their “juche” (self-reliance) philosophy have destroyed North Korea's economy. As many as one million North Koreans died of hunger over the past decade, in large part due to five consecutive years of extremely poor rice production from 2018-2022. Most major providers withheld foreign aid following Pyongyang's decision to continue development of their nuclear program, although the belief is that substantial, but illegal, Chinese trade continued. Several years of milder weather patterns have allowed production of crops sufficient to sustain the population – although most people remain impoverished.

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In June of 2010, following a decline in Kim Jung Il's health and reports of pancreatic cancer, his son, Kim Jong Un, was announced as his successor. Following his father's death, Kim Jong Un took control of the DPRK in December of 2011. Kim Jong Un has continued his father's repressive policies and ideology, emphasizing self-sufficiency and a worship of the Kim family. Kim Jong Un's ability to hold on to authoritarian rule despite his country's condition continues to baffle experts. There appears to be a divide in Kim's civilian leadership team, with some loosening of state control of information and resources to improve living conditions. Pushback from some in the armed forces has centered on the perceived sacrifice of military readiness for increased development of civilian infrastructure despite a continued state of war.

Recent intelligence reports indicated a growing rift between certain DPRK generals and Kim Jong Un. The inner circle of Kim Jong Un's military clique (which handles security issues) was pushed out in favor of domestic advisors favoring economic liberalization, with several agriculture and industrial ministers gaining prominence. Military leadership has strained to maintain cohesion with first line of commanders who also control much of the agricultural production in their regions. The execution of several senior generals in 2017 created a power vacuum, which the military and Kim dynasty have competed to fill with their supporters. Military analysts suspected factional infighting, seemingly confirmed by the disappearance of heavyweight leaders. By 2021, most analysts have concluded that the military hardliners have consolidated power among the armed forces, but are concerned that non-military leaders have displaced them within the central government. Control of North Korean nuclear assets has remained a focus of the DPRK's military. In October 2006, North Korea became the world's eighth atomic power, conducting an underground nuclear weapons test. The country's nuclear program and its development of long-range rocket systems continue to cause global outrage.

The DPRK is not a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and may be pursuing development of a large chemical weapons program. North Korea is a party to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) and Geneva Protocol, but is suspected of maintaining an offensive weapons program in defiance of the BTWC. The DPRK is assumed to have large BW and CW programs. The 2012 Defense White Paper by South Korea's Ministry of National Defense estimates that the DPRK possesses the causative agents of anthrax and smallpox, among others. Pyongyang has concentrated on acquiring mustard, phosgene, sarin, and V-type chemical agents. Pyongyang also has placed thousands of artillery systems – including multiple launch rocket systems that would be particularly effective for chemical weapons delivery – within range of the Demilitarized Zone and Seoul.

Until 2023, Kim Jong Un continued to play political cat-and-mouse games with the international community. Each time there seemed to be progress towards nuclear disarmament, Pyongyang would renege on the deal and blame U.S. military presence on the peninsula for its reluctance to disband its nuclear program. Pyongyang has repeatedly extracted enormous infusions of energy and food aid.

However, since 2023 civilian leaders in North Korea have made quiet approaches to the South Korean government. In late 2025, senior civilian representatives close to the Kim dynasty agreed to hold secret multilateral meetings with the Republic of Korea facilitated by the United States and Japan. It appears that Kim Jong Un is seeking a graceful way to improve conditions inside North Korea independent of the military leadership. His emissaries have expressed interest in

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finding a peaceful resolution to the Korean Conflict. U.S. and NATO analysts have assessed that the Kim dynasty is pursuing negotiations in good faith, and is thereby seeking internal means to truncate the power of the North Korean military leadership and apparatus.

The North Korean military continues to sell military goods to at least 18 countries, mostly in Africa and the Middle East. North Korea's catalog has included ballistic missiles and related components, conventional weapons such as mobile rocket launchers, and, in the case of Myanmar and Iran, nuclear technology. These sales fund further research and acquisition of more advanced ballistic missile, uranium enrichment, and information technologies, and enrich high-ranking officers. Despite international warnings and continuing sanctions, North Korea continued to test its developing missile technology. By 2018, analysts were convinced North Korea had developed missiles capable of reaching Europe, Australia, and the United States.

Endowed with the national domain suffix “kp,” North Korea remains the only country in the world not connected to the internet. Although the top-level domain remains dormant, there are several North Korean government sites online, typically hosted on either Japanese or Chinese servers. Wide spread denial of service attacks against U.S. and South Korean government and civilian sites in 2021 confirmed previous suspicions that Kim Jong Un had developed a research center of about 100 cyber-warfare warriors. This unit, called “No. 110,” is under the Reconnaissance Bureau of the North Korean People’s Army.

#### **South Korea**

South Korea maintains good relations with the United States while also being sensitive to the need for good relations with China. South Korea and Japan, despite historical animosity, remain economically reliant on one another, and increasingly cooperate when dealing with China. South Korea’s relationships with members of ASEAN remain cordial but limited.

The alliance between the United States and South Korea has suffered periods of strain over the past decade. Liberal Korean opposition parties were quick to denounce Washington’s intentions when the handover of wartime control took place on December 1, 2015 – two years after the originally established date. In 2018, a rift occurred between Seoul and Washington when Pyongyang used the kidnapping of an American tourist as a way to entice a U.S. representative to Pyongyang for negotiations, and then used the media to spin the meeting as a direct peace talk with the United States, bypassing South Korea. Seoul also wants U.S. troops to remain in the country despite some public pressure for them to leave. Recent secret negotiations with North Korea have made progress because of détente between diplomats in both countries, with the United States and Japan brought in when negotiations reached a point at which the parties began discussing logistics of reconciliation.

The Korean economic miracle has continued, despite a significant impact on the South Korean economy following the financial crisis of 2008. Following the bankruptcy of a major Korean financial institution, the Korean Won lost up to 30% of its value, forcing the Korean government to introduce a major stimulus package to revive the economy. Due to the forward economic policies of the government, South Korea’s economy has remained strong and has earned the distinctive reputation as an “Asian Tiger” within the international community. Its economy is the fourth largest in Asia and the tenth largest in the world in terms of market exchange nominal GDP as of 2026.



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The Korean National Oil Corporation (KNOC) formed a joint venture with two European companies to build a 4.6 million barrel storage terminal at Yosu. Since the project's completion in 2013, South Korea has emerged as a trading, blending, storage, and pricing hub akin to Singapore. South Korea serves the Northeast Asian market, which accounts for approximately 70% of Asian oil demand. South Korea's main trading partners continue to be the United States, China, and Japan.

#### **Taiwan**

For years, Taiwan attempted to gain entry into various international organizations by emphasizing its commitment to democracy, its pursuit of a free-market economy, and its respect for human rights. Taiwan's persistence finally paid off when in 2009 it gained admission to the World Health Organization (WHO) as an observer. Further, its membership in a growing number of international organizations has gained the Taiwanese government greater legitimacy among its neighbors and the international community at large. Taiwan's economic prowess and determination to play a more active role on the global stage have made it an important and influential member of these organizations.

Along with increased international visibility, Taiwan began a political transformation. Since the March 2024 presidential election victory by Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Wu Pei-fu, both the Chinese New Party (CNP) and the DPP made huge electoral gains throughout all levels of government at the expense of the Nationalist Party (KMT). The KMT representatives are now relegated to a minority status in the National Assembly. In his victory speech, newly elected President Wu Pei-fu confirmed he would continue arms procurement talks with the United States as well as other nations to maintain the status quo across the Strait.

The DPP gains were largely a result of Taiwan's commitment to a more ethical and transparent government and its stand on corollary issues such as the environment. The DPP distinguishes itself from the KMT through its domestic social policies, anti-corruption stance, and promotion of effective government. Internationally, the DPP advocates greater integration into the world community and enhancement of the prosperity and security of Taiwan. DPP's political power base remains in the south, and in return for continued support, party leaders are replacing many top military leaders with personnel from this area. Going a step further, the CNP advocates overtures to other regional powers whose influence could help to increase leverage for Taiwanese independence.

The relationship between China and Taiwan still dominates the government's agenda. "One China" talks with the mainland are at a standstill. Some think tanks advocate a "breakout" strategy based on close cooperation with India, which continues to increase its activity in the region. The academic community hopes that closer economic, political and military ties between the two countries will prompt India to support a separate Taiwanese UN General Assembly seat. Increasing economic connection between Taiwan and the PRC has complicated moves towards Taiwanese independence. The mutual economic coupling combined with the China/Taiwan military standoff creates a highly delicate status quo.

In the meantime, Taiwan and India have combined India's software prowess with Taiwan's computer hardware and communication technology expertise to expand Taiwan's technology industry from a manufacturing powerhouse to an end-to-end system supplier. This transition to e-

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government, however, has not been problem-free. Government offices that have traditionally been used to monitor mainland activity or are run by officials known to oppose Beijing have routinely been shut down by denial of service attacks, found their web pages defaced, or – worse yet – become a source of misinformation when pro-China materials mysteriously on the sites.

The cross-strait economic relationship between Taiwan and China blossomed with the volume of two-way trade across the Taiwan Strait increasing yearly. However, CEOs from some of Taiwan's top companies (Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, Formosa Plastic Corporation, and United Micro Electronics Corporation) are pursuing Indian investment opportunities as a hedge against the seizure of factories on the mainland or their nationalization if tensions between China and Taiwan escalate.

Taiwan's economy is strong and shows no signs of slowing down. Real growth in GDP has averaged about 5% for the last decade. Exports provide the primary economic driver. Inflation and unemployment are low, the trade surplus is substantial, and foreign reserves are the fourth largest in the world.

### **Southeast Asia**

By 2010, the first decade of the third millennium was shaping up to be one of growth and progress for the region. However, most of the region's nations were becoming increasingly wary of growing Chinese power, and aggressive Chinese claims to resources and territory.

Rapid economic growth generally characterized the initial ASEAN-member states (Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines), as they became major players in the global market system. Using the export-led development strategies that fueled earlier growth in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, they expanded their combined GNPs by nearly 5% annually. ASEAN economies became major investment markets for both U.S. and Middle Eastern investors. While maintaining the same rates of military expenditures, they modernized their military capabilities without expanding force levels. Although Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam lagged behind during the early part of the 21st century, membership in ASEAN did help improve their economies.

ASEAN, which previously limited its activities to economic matters, created the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in 2006 as a forum to discuss security matters among member states. The ADMM is composed of ministry of defense representatives of member nations, and works with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to resolve military crises in their organization's area of concern. Current ARF membership includes Bangladesh, Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Consultative partners include China and Russia while dialogue partners include Australia, Canada, the EU, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and the United States. Enacted in the 1990s, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is by no means a true free trade regime in every respect. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum (consisting of all the members of AFTA and many non-ASEAN countries) continued as a "talking shop" on economic and other issues affecting Pacific Rim countries but tended to restrain the extreme exclusionary "Asianist" voices. However, regional concerns about the role of China and other political tensions, especially between the United States and China, began to limit APEC's effectiveness.

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#### **Vietnam**

Vietnam remains a one party state dominated by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Its relations with the United States have greatly strengthened over the past decade. A significant turnover occurred during the 10th Communist Party National Congress, when younger members replaced many key aging party veterans. These new members were sympathetic to calls from Vietnamese citizens for human rights reform, political pluralism, and religious freedom. Although Vietnam remains far from democratic, its many reforms regarding human rights have gained it international legitimacy. Improved military relations between the United States and Vietnam have resulted in cooperation on defense, nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and law enforcement. Vietnam is now an active participant in international peacekeeping operations.

Bolstered by U.S. recognition and accession into the WTO, Vietnam's economic performance has had real growth averaging over 5% annually since 2016. Much of this growth comes from foreign investment outlays. Foreign capital is contributing to a boom in commercial construction and strong growth in the service and industrial sectors. The government recognizes that such investment is necessary to help sustain the growing pace of economic development and industrialization and has therefore encouraged foreign investment, techno-logical expertise, and management practices. Cam Ranh Bay has been developed into a world-class port due mainly to American economic investments.

The SCS is not only rich in natural resources (fishing, oil and natural gas), but is also one of the world's busiest shipping lanes for supertanker traffic. Vietnam relies on access to SCS resources and shipping routes to support economic growth. They are pursuing joint ventures with foreign oil companies to exploit oil reserves in the Vietnamese portions of the SCS and have already awarded a limited number of exploratory contracts to American and Indian oil firms. Vietnamese claims in the SCS conflict with those of China and remain a serious point of contention.

Relations between India and Vietnam have strengthened to include bilateral cooperation over issues such as terrorism, trade and regional security. India has played a vital role in the capacity building of Vietnam's military deterrence capabilities. Beginning in April 2009, the Indian Navy has frequented the port of Hai Phong, supporting naval exchanges between the two countries. Vietnam and India have established closer military ties, including Indian assistance in upgrading the Vietnamese armed forces. Intelligence analysts assess that Vietnam is considering offering India a 99-year lease on a site in Hai Phong Harbor that could be used jointly to support Indian commercial and naval vessels. However, no official negotiations have begun.

The country's most significant security concern is its northern neighbor, China. Mistrust defines the Hanoi-Beijing relationship. Vietnam has suffered economically from Chinese claims in the SCS. In late 2021, tensions again rose as China conducted naval exercises close to the Paracel Islands, including the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa archipelagos claimed by Vietnam. Hanoi was quick to object that the exercises "violated Vietnam's sovereignty" when the Chinese declared a closed "Military Training Zone" around the islands. Several hundred Vietnamese demonstrated outside the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and Chinese Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City, chanting nationalist and anti-Chinese slogans. Vietnam, who fought a brief skirmish with China over the Paracels in 2022, has not conducted military exercises in the area since.

Hostility towards China has translated into hostility towards Vietnam's Chinese minority. Vietnam's historically poor treatment of its ethnic Chinese population, numbering some one

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million people, appears to increase during times of deteriorating Sino-Vietnamese relations. In 2023 Vietnam imposed restrictions on Chinese trade activity following perceived threats by China to Vietnam's sovereignty, sending chills through the Chinese-Vietnamese community. In spite of the growing evidence that Chinese émigrés identify with their countries of residence rather than with China, the notion persists in Southeast Asian countries that their ethnically Chinese populations ultimately have an emotional and political attachment to China making them potential fifth columnists for the "mother country."

A 2026 outbreak of violence by ethnic Chinese in the northern province of Thai Binh led to strong retaliation by Vietnamese nationals. A steady stream of ethnic Han refugees flowed north across the Chinese border. U.S. humanitarian aid groups, invited at the request of the Vietnamese government, set up stations along the Vietnamese/Chinese border to address refugee health concerns. Meanwhile, China has complained about the U.S. presence in close proximity to its territory and Chinese forces have moved closer to the Sino-Viet border.

#### **Indonesia**

After East Timor won its independence in 1999, the Indonesian government tried to discourage further separatism by initiating a National Campaign Plan (NCP) and by drafting new laws that delegated power to the provinces. The United States, pleased by the positive steps taken by Jakarta, began granting aid packages focused on improving Indonesian infrastructure, education, and agricultural productivity.

The United States, responding to Indonesia's need for support in their counter-terrorism efforts, began providing robust security assistance to the Indonesian military in 2010. From 2010-2017 Jakarta aggressively pursued radical Islamists with assistance from the U.S. military. However, the counter-terrorism campaign launched by the government backfired, resulting in numerous allegations of human rights abuses and increased support for the radical Islamist movement throughout the country. Terrorist attacks continue to occur as smaller splinter groups emerge from the remnants of militant movements.

The Indonesian government has made genuine efforts to develop an effective anti-money laundering system for investigations and prosecutions. However, the Indonesian-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) released a Mutual Evaluation Report in 2023, which noted relatively little impact from the implementation of these counter terrorist finance measures.

In 2019, the people of Indonesia elected a new government that promised to act in the best interest of the citizens of Indonesia, and once in office severed military cooperation with the United States. Even though Jakarta was determined to remain completely independent of outside influences, its economic and military ties with Beijing began to increase. In 2022, a Beijing oil firm signed a deal to participate in a joint venture to develop the Cepu oil field, previously managed by Exxon Mobil. In 2024, China and Indonesia began discussions to facilitate Chinese naval port visits to the northern coast of Sumatra in return for greater Chinese naval presence to help fight piracy in the SOM.

Recent maritime activities in and around the SOM indicate that there is a heightened terrorist threat to shipping. An Indonesian terrorist group is possibly planning a series of attacks with assistance from AQ. This assistance includes the movement of possible foreign fighters and

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financial support. While there have not been any unambiguous warnings, there were numerous events that indicate operational surveillance and planning is ongoing.

#### **Thailand**

Thailand continues to be one of the United States' strongest allies in Southeast Asia and despite the death of King Bhumibol the Great in 2016. His successor, Vajralongkorn, does not share his popularity; however, he continues to support the 1962 Rusk-Thanat Agreement, the two countries remain de facto treaty allies. Thailand has a free-enterprise economy, which has continued to bring in foreign investors since the early 2000s. Bangkok continues to struggle against drug trafficking, international crime syndicates and insurgent movements that have plagued it for over a decade. As with most of its small neighbors, Thailand is concerned with China's efforts to be a regional superpower and warily watched as China constructed 13 hydroelectric dams on the Salween River in Yunnan Province.

Beginning in 2023, piracy attacks along the Malaysia-Thailand maritime border increased. This increased activity caused Thailand to approach Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia in an effort to join and extend the MALSINDO anti-piracy patrols to include the Thai southeast coast. In an effort to improve surveillance effectiveness, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia implemented cooperative airborne maritime surveillance.

#### **Malaysia**

Established in Malaysia on April 1, 2008, the collective ruling party, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) is a political coalition comprised of a group of Malaysian political parties – namely, the People's Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). The PR was able to garner majority support through its moderate agenda and the populace's dissatisfaction with former the ruling party's (United Malays National Organization [UMNO]) inability to revive the rural economy and stamp out corruption. As a result, the PR came to power in a landslide victory in the 2013 general election. Despite winning on a relatively moderate agenda, the PR moved significantly to the right in terms of hardline Islamic views as coalition partners faced an internal struggle for dominance. Leading up to the 2018 elections PAS members became dominant in the party resulting in a Malaysian government essentially controlled by the hardline Islamic party.

Over the past decade, Malaysia has become the region's Islamic financial powerhouse. Malaysia leads in recycling funds from the oil rich states of West Asia to the markets of East Asia where Muslim capital is employed in accordance with Sharia law. Malaysia's offshore banking center on the island of Labuan is more vulnerable to money laundering schemes and the financing of terrorism than the rest of the formal financial sector in Malaysia. Presently, Labuan has 59 offshore banks in operation. Substantial gains for all participants in the past decade have contributed to the emergence of a distinctive Islamic mode of capitalism.

#### **Myanmar**

Myanmar is a resource-rich country that suffers from stringent government controls and abject rural poverty. Even after the overwhelming international relief aid provided following Typhoon Nargis in 2008, the government reverted to its tightly controlled government policies. Myanmar

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holds one of the worst human rights records in the world and the government continues to repress its people and all opposition parties.

While the U.S. policy of isolation and sanctions against Myanmar following the 2008 typhoon served to alienate American influence and effectiveness in the country, Myanmar's neighbors chose engagement. China has extensive trade relations with Myanmar and uses it as a back door to the Bay of Bengal. India sells arms to Myanmar as a counterpoint to China's influence, and the members of ASEAN continue trade and investment, choosing “noninterference” in internal affairs. North Korea has also become a key partner Myanmar trade.

Despite a temporary thaw and move towards greater democratic involvement following international protests over an obviously rigged but peaceful election in 2010 and a strong showing by opposition parties in the 2012 by-elections, Myanmar has continued to resist full integration into the global community. Improvements in internal freedoms did not result in closer alignment with ASEAN, cooperation with UN civil rights investigations, or limitations in the pursuit of weapons technology.

In July of 2009, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed concern about reports that Myanmar and North Korea were increasing military ties and called on Asian governments to join in countering efforts that may destabilize the region. North Korea helped Myanmar set up uranium and nuclear-related facilities. Exiled Myanmar media professionals were first to voice alarm at the reports of growing ties between Myanmar and the nuclear-armed North Korea. Jakarta was able to encourage other ASEAN member nations to approach Myanmar on its purported nuclear weapons development; however, Myanmar maintains its right to develop nuclear energy for civil purposes and denies any North Korean involvement or intention to develop nuclear weapons. Analysts of international relations in the region recently suggested that Myanmar's alleged nuclear work poses a threat to arms control in the area. “For decades, Myanmar’s ruling regime has been regarded primarily as a menace to its own people. But with recent reports confirming long-held suspicions that the junta aspires to establish Myanmar as Southeast Asia’s first nuclear state, there is now a very real danger that it is emerging as a threat to the rest of the region.”

North Korea hosted a Myanmar delegation in November 2022 to exhibit North Korean surface-to-air missiles, along with naval and air defense systems. Also on the tour was the defensive tunnel construction Pyongyang uses to store aircraft and ships underground to protect them from aerial attack. Recent assessments indicate that the North Korean military has exported these systems to Myanmar.

The opaque nature and the incomplete and often-contradictory statistical data produced by the Myanmar government complicates gaining an accurate assessment of the economy. The rising value of the country's oil and natural gas exports has reversed a balance of payments deficit that had persisted for decades. Natural gas has been the largest source of officially recorded export revenue followed by hardwood, beans, and pulses. Narcotics, principally synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines and, to a lesser extent, organic opiates such as opium and its derivatives, generate hundreds of millions of dollars each year for the producers, smugglers, and their patrons. The patrons include powerful military and business leaders, and revenues from the illicit drugs trade percolate deep into many sections of the economy.

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By 2020, China began construction of oil and gas pipelines through Myanmar. Myanmar signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia's atomic energy agency in May 2007, to build a 10-megawatt light-water reactor. This reactor, completed in 2016, is supposedly only for the production of electricity. Myanmar is a member state to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the International Atomic Energy Agency. However, it has not signed the UN's Additional Protocol, which would allow for greater scrutiny of the nation's nuclear operations. As early as 2010, Jane's stated: "With Myanmar's current freedom from sanctions and relative economic prosperity, the junta may be able to outsource the technical know-how and tools to reach its goals [nuclear weapons] far sooner than expected."

#### **The Philippines**

The Filipino economy has shown slow development. While its economy has improved since the turn of the century, growth rates have remained lower than those of the other original ASEAN member states. Inequity in the distribution of wealth has caused a higher Gini Coefficient than in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

Internal security concerns center on the ongoing Islamist separatist insurgency struggle waged in the southern Philippines since the late 1960s. The Islamist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which formed in 1991 from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), remains capable of kidnappings, bombings, and other acts of terrorism that cause destabilization throughout the country. ASG has suspected ties to AQ and receives training from Jemaah Islamiya (JI).

External security concerns center on Philippine claims to some portion of the Spratly Islands (a misnomer since in its 2016 award the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) found that none of the so-called islands meet the UNCLOS definition), claims contested by Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, Vietnam, and China. The PCA's decision did verify the Philippine maritime claim under UNCLOS to a 200nm EEZ in their portion of the SCS, encompassing a large portion of their old claim, known as the Kalayaan Island Group, and denying Chinese claims to the same area.

Manila's relations with Washington continue to be friendly and expansive, with the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty remaining fully in effect. In 2020 the Philippine government signed a fifty-year agreement with the United States that secured permanent basing for U.S. naval, marine and air forces, a complete reversal of the loss of U.S. basing rights in 1992. Even though President Duterte had been outspoken against the U.S./Philippine relations, there has been no significant change in the actual execution of ongoing military exchanges and exercises.

Since 2012, China has been actively harassing Filipino fishing vessels near Scarborough Shoal, a kidney-shaped reef with an internal lagoon that sits near the edge of the Philippine 200nm EEZ. While China has stopped short of occupying or building on the shoal, which previous U.S. administrations have indicated is a red line that China should not cross, it has not hesitated to chase off Filipino fishing vessels with its heavily armed fishing enforcement vessels.

#### **Terrorism in Southeast Asia**

Over the past twenty years, militant Islam has been on the rise in Southeast Asia. Spanning from the 2002 terrorist bomb attack in Bali to the 2009 attack in Jakarta to the early 2018 attacks in Phuket, Thailand, there have been on average 1.5 major terrorist attacks per year in the region directed against Western targets. The JI terrorist network orchestrated each of these attacks in

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their continuing campaign to liberate Southeast Asia from “corrupt” Western values. Despite the success of Southeast Asian governments in capturing numerous JI operatives and closing down training camps, the group continues to demonstrate its capacity to attack local Western targets.

There is evidence that JI, based in Indonesia, has additional cells in Malaysia and the Philippines. Investigations indicate that JI is fully capable of its own fundraising, although it also has received financial, ideological, and logistical support from Middle Eastern contacts and non-governmental organizations.

Although no state in the region is known to support terrorism, it is believed that many terrorists train in makeshift camps in most nations bordering the SCS and have links with other terrorist groups throughout the world. AQ and JI share common goals; however, the JI runs independently of AQ despite retaining close ties for over a decade. JI associates in the Philippines provide operational support and training for indigenous Philippine Muslim violent extremists.

Terrorists continue to operate in this region. Some acts of violence and criminal activity have been linked with maritime terrorism and militant groups in Southeast Asia. Many terrorist organizations can be found throughout Southeast Asia, specifically the Laskar Jihad and JI in Indonesia, the Kumpulan Mujahidin in Malaysia, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) with known links to Al-Qaeda, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines. It is believed that any state or commercial entity that supports western powers, especially the United States, will be deemed a target by terrorist organizations. Disruption of traffic on the SOM is considered as a credible objective for regional and international terrorist organizations seeking to damage western interests.

Over 50,000 vessels travel through the SOM in a year. Of note, over 60 billion barrels of oil transit the strait annually. At peak shipping periods, over two hundred large to very large vessels transit the waterway each day. The number of piracy incidents within the SOM and the waters surrounding Indonesia are not immense; nevertheless, in 2024 three fourths of all maritime piracy incidents worldwide took place in Southeast Asia.

The countries within the region are operating within their means to combat terrorism. Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines have arrested more than 200 JI members since 2021. Recently, both Malaysia and Singapore have individually taken measures to safeguard their portions of the Malacca and Singapore Straits, which have reduced the number of piracy incidents. They can focus more attention on this area than Indonesia because of their political and economic stability. Indonesia’s political, economic, and social problems require most of its attention to be focused internally thereby giving security of the SOM a lower priority. Additionally, the vast size of the 93,000 square kilometers of Indonesian territorial waters make it impossible for the Indonesian Navy to patrol everywhere.

#### **India**

India has a rapidly expanding economy and a population expected to exceed China's by 2050. The nation is striving for influence on par with this growth. However, these strong economic gains have not translated into equally strong per capita increases – approximately 39% of the population lives below the international poverty line.



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The greatest threat facing the country is resource scarcity; India suffers from regular water shortages and is heavily dependent on fossil fuels to power its economic growth. This places it in direct competition with its neighbors and regional rivals, especially China. India pursues partnerships with many countries. This has manifested itself in a small movement on the political left interested in rapprochement with Pakistan in order to strengthen the sub-continent's global influence. However, the aim of these partnerships is to maximize India's autonomy, not to align India with any country or international coalition.

India has become more active in recent years, seeking a larger role in the international community. India's military has focused on securing approaches to the Indian Ocean, mainly by working with countries on the east end of the SOM to protect its interests there. As a part of its "Look East" foreign policy, India has cultivated ties with Southeast Asia and Taiwan in trade, the environment, and security concerns. Strategic rivalry, suspicion, and tenuous relations with the PRC led India to develop improved commercial relations and strategic cooperation with Taiwan while not ruling out the possibility of establishing formal diplomatic relations. Rumors concerning India's interest in Taiwan include support for the creation of a separate Taiwanese UN General Assembly seat. Analysts propose this might increase Indian prestige by accomplishing something that the United States could not do. Taiwan views India's rising geopolitical standing as a potential counterbalance to China's regional dominance.

Over the past decade, India's leadership has increasingly become more vocal in its public criticism of their country's main rival for regional resources and geopolitical influence – China. This dates to 2010, when Prime Minister Singh's reflected a growing friction over disputed borders and competing roles as emerging global powers. Singh was quoted by the *Times of India* as saying, "China would like to have a foothold in South Asia and we have to reflect on this reality. We have to be aware of this." The newspaper also quoted Singh as saying that China could use India's "soft underbelly" of Kashmir, a region disputed with Pakistan, "to keep India in low level equilibrium." Trade between India and China has grown thirty-fold since 2000 and is expanding; however, current tensions highlight how economic ties alone may not be enough to soothe relations between the two countries. Dr. Gancheng, an expert on Sino-Indian relations in Beijing has summarized the developing situation as one in which "mutual confidence between the countries is far from sufficient and that the problem is rising in importance":

*Many key figures in the India's government believe China has crossed the red lines that affect India's core sovereignty concerns. While there are green lines such as trade, there are growing concerns here as well, such as the trade imbalance and anti-dumping concerns. There is also a realization in India that you have to make your displeasure more explicit to be taken seriously.*

Negative rhetoric, coupled with the deployment of multiple Chinese missile brigades armed with the CSS-5 medium-range ballistic missiles along their joint borders, has heightened tension between China and India.

India, second only to the United States in software production, has developed pockets of excellence in the manufacture of computers and other high tech equipment. The United States continues to be India's major trading partner and source of foreign investment. Military cooperation has increased and in 2019 the United States, Israel, Britain, and France supplanted

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Russia as the primary supplier of modern weapons and equipment. India's pursuit of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council remains unfulfilled.

Kashmir dominates relations between India and Pakistan. Pakistan continues to insist that Kashmir is territorially contiguous with West Pakistan, and Pakistan should gain the state. India has maintained its position that the decision to join India was taken by the Maharaja and that there is no need for further discussion. India is adamant that it cannot lose any part of Kashmir.

## **EUROPEAN REGION**

### **Overview**

Europe remains a broadly diverse region with significant sub-regional divisions that vary widely in political, economic, religious, and social structures. These wide variations have created internal and international tensions that still threaten to fracture some nations, weaken the European Union (EU), and threaten regional stability. The weakness of the EU in all aspects – economics, governance, and in particular security – helped drive the successful Brexit campaign in 2016 to leave the EU, followed in 2018 by successful separation referendums in both Scotland and Northern Ireland conducted to ensure that both remain in the EU, which effectively ended the United Kingdom. The roiling of the United Kingdom drove nationalist factions in other vulnerable European nations to call for increased autonomy or outright independence. Specifically, in Spain, Catalonia and the Basques both sought and failed to achieve independence; however, in Belgium, the home of the European Council, the Flemish and Walloons chose to end their forced unity in mid-2026. On the other hand, the nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina has held together, yet the years of relatively peaceful coexistence have barely concealed a quiet reordering by the peoples of that nation along increasingly ethnic lines, creating ethnically pure sectors.

The political landscape of Europe is disparate, as Eastern and Southern countries continue to struggle to establish truly democratic forms of government. This is particularly so in Greece, where the earlier trend toward support for leftist agendas has engendered renewed support for Communist-style governance, culminating in 2024 with the installation of a Communist-led regime. Russia's drive to increase its influence within these nations has challenged the governments in East and South Europe. Moscow has made inroads within many Eastern European countries through highly manipulative strategies targeted at both the older generation that retains certain nostalgia for state-controlled and subsidized economic policies, and a younger generation frustrated by a standard of living that is significantly lower than that enjoyed by their Western European neighbors.

Meanwhile, economic policy, social policies, and burgeoning national debt have limited the economic growth of the democratic Western nations. Manufacturing and technology jobs have moved to the Pacific region, South Asia, and, to a smaller extent, Africa. The average standard of living in Italy, France, and other prosperous countries remains comfortable but their GDPs have declined as a share of the global economy. Thus, regional cooperation through alliances like the EU or smaller economic, political, and defense cooperative associations is now the status quo as aggregate economies are better positioned to compete in world markets. The Baltic States have firmly aligned themselves with the EU and NATO, many other eastern European economies have sought to strike balance between the EU and Russia; however, some, such as Bulgaria,

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overtly favor Russia over the EU, while others, such as Greece and Cyprus, use their increasingly warm relations with Russia to leverage the EU.

When Russian gas giant, Gazprom, cut-off gas shipments through Ukraine in 2009, it crippled most of Europe. In 2018 when Russia again cut-off gas shipments through Ukraine, U.S. supplies, primarily in the form of liquid natural gas, greatly softened the blow from the loss of Russian gas. Over the past decade, the EU has helped finance new energy lines from sources in Azerbaijan and Central Asia transiting through Georgia and Turkey, and Poland and the Baltic states are pursuing offshore regasification projects to receive LNG shipments, all in order to lessen significantly the need for Russian supplies, a strategy that irritated Moscow. In the years since the end of the tensions over Ukraine, the resulting energy independence from Russia seemingly allowed U.S. and European leaders to ignore Moscow on political and social issues, even though there was widespread evidence of Russian meddling within its “near abroad.”

Over the years, the leaders of the Eastern European states, led by Poland, have had to face the challenge of Moscow’s aggressive nature and ambitions regarding the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet states without backing from the EU and, as seen by the Poles, inadequate support from the U.S. or NATO. Eastern Europe has divided in terms of its vulnerability to Russian influence, with the northern states strongly committed to the West, the EU, and NATO, and the southern states desiring to return to the old Soviet-era type relationships with Russia.

Few nations have met the agreed 2% of GDP goal for military investment and sustainment. In addition, with the failure of the European Defense Initiative (EDI), nations such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom continued to reduce force structures through 2024. However, in recent years, the United States, at the behest of Poland and the Baltic states, has increased military stationing and capabilities within Eastern Europe, formally known as the Enhanced Forward Presence Program, as suspicions about Moscow continue to increase regional tensions.

The large influx of refugees from North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia, which peaked in 2019, led to large-scale unemployment among recent immigrants. Competition for jobs has resulted in increasing “natives versus immigrants” resentment. Rising taxes to support the ranks of immigrants enrolled in social programs led younger Europeans to protest against immigrants’ rights. In larger numbers, European elites are moving their money and themselves to North America, primarily Canada and Mexico. Rising costs of social programs and the loss of revenue from elites, continues to put a strain on defense spending for common European defense. The reduction of already small defense spending, coupled with rising nationalism in many European countries, contributes to the weakening of the EU.

### **NATO**

In 2023 and 2024 respectively, Serbia and Sweden joined NATO. Despite the appearance of a strong alliance, with the addition of two more member nations, cracks in NATO’s structure have continued to occur. Although NATO continued to provide the security umbrella for its 30 member nations, the past 20-years has seen a significant shift in its military capabilities. Poland, unique among European NATO members, led with expanded military procurement and training programs throughout the decade due to its continued concerns about Russian intentions. Despite a renewed concern by Germany, France, and the United Kingdom – other blocs of NATO members including Italy, Spain, and Portugal, did not perceive an urgent need to increase

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military spending. Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Hungary are also pursuing increased defense spending in an effort to please their key western NATO partners, but find themselves at odds with NATO leaders as they also seek to pursue cooperative military agreements and joint exercises with the Russian Federation.

NATO analysts assess that Moscow's committed efforts to revitalize and recapitalize the Russian military establishment has given Russia a renewed ability to initiate and sustain high intensity military action to the West or South. Perceived Russian agitation, evidenced in the recent tensions regarding Lithuania have caused France, Poland, and the United Kingdom to put pressure on their fellow NATO members to rebuild their defense structures. Germany, which has built a much closer relationship with Russia, has not shared in this concern and, subsequently, has not significantly changed its defense posture.

For its part, the United States remained committed to Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) in Europe. Permanently deployed Aegis BMD ships in Rota, Spain significantly increased the U.S. ability to keep naval BMD forces in both the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas. The United States emplaced an Aegis Ashore battery with missile interceptors in southern Romania at Deveselu Air Base, and a second in Northern Poland. These capabilities have greatly increased NATO's ability to address most missile threats from either Russia or Iran. In 2024, President McGraw signed an agreement with the Czech Republic to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery. The agreement stalled in Congress as both sides debate the usefulness of such a capability against Russia or Iran.

Russian response to increased U.S. and NATO BMD forces was predictably harsh, but Iranian nuclear tests (as of 2025 no longer prohibited by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) effectively reinforced the need for BMD capabilities. Most European governments publicly endorsed the European BMD architecture. Whether under U.S. or NATO control, BMD deployments were a non-negotiable reality. Several nations expressed both publicly and privately that Russia should join the BMD architecture as a way to encourage stability and the United States has held that door open. As of November 2025, Moscow continued to disparage the BMD mission in Europe, viewing it as another threat. Moscow cited the Azerbaijani government's 2023 decision to lease the Gabala Radar Station, a key Russian intelligence outpost, to NATO as justification for its increasing displeasure with "an overly aggressive NATO subservient to a reckless regime in Washington."

#### **European Union**

The systemic disruptions initially caused by Brexit have continued to roil the EU and caused the union's membership to vacillate over the past few years. The current EU membership stands at 32 nations with the addition of Scotland and Northern Island in 2019 (the remainder of the UK – England and Wales – withdrew from the EU in March of 2019), Iceland and Georgia in 2020, Serbia and Montenegro 2022, and Bulgaria in 2024. Meanwhile, the EU attempted to forge ahead with the EDI, but support finally collapsed in 2019. While the union member states ratified a new constitution the next year, the original security component remained unchanged, leaving NATO as the sole primary European security element. Today the EU struggles to find significance beyond being not much more than an economic union.

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In March of 2021, in the midst of yet another recession the EU expelled Greece, Cyprus and the Republic of Ireland from the Eurozone. While a shock to the EU system, it proved temporary. By 2021, most European economies finally stabilized and began a measured, though hardly robust, recovery. The Union's actions led to an outcry by many of those living in Europe's weaker economies who condemned the erosion of benefits in order to balance budgets. Germany, which contributed considerable sums to prevent the Greek and Cyprus meltdowns from completely devaluing the Euro, increasingly favors a move away from the Euro and the EU, toward reestablishment of the Deutsche Mark. Additional bailouts for Portugal and Spain have left the more prosperous members of the EU with no appetite for increased military spending.

#### **Russia**

Russian election in 2020 resulted in the ouster of many moderate and democratically minded members of the Duma. Despite claims by international observers that election results were manipulated to favor Putin and his supporters, the new hardline and nationalist focused Duma met on schedule for its first session. Among its first acts was to give legislators a large pay increase and modify the constitution in such a manner as to effectively permit Vladimir Putin to remain president for life. The Duma heartily endorsed Vladimir Putin's long-standing objective to reestablish Russia to some vestige of the old Soviet Union as a power equal to the United States and a rising China. Internally he has attempted to expedite his desires by silencing rivals, repressing the opposition, and shackling any notion of a free press. Both inside and outside of Russia, most now see the Duma as a powerless body that merely rubber-stamps Putin's policies. The military is seen a major part of this strategy, and senior military leaders, all personally promoted by Putin, are extremely loyal to him.

Russia continues to use obstructionist tactics in the UN Security Council and disruptive interference in international and interstate conflicts in bold attempts to reclaim both territory and influence within the former Warsaw Pact region. As a major exporter of military equipment, Russia has maintained a state of the art military industrial base. Airpower systems, in competition with the United States, offer sophisticated modern aircraft at prices significantly lower than similar U.S. products and in stiff competition to European defense manufacturers.

Economically, President Putin pulled certain sectors of the Russian economy out of the doldrums almost solely on a still somewhat robust energy sector that now boasts of Asian nations among its most significant customers. A tolerance for corruption, competition with the EU, and monopolistic tendencies dominate Russian economic policy. In the early years of this century, Russia was the dominant energy supplier to much of Europe. For many years, this dynamic placed Russia in a very advantageous economic position and had a tempering effect on individual and collective decision making by European countries. However, the lack of investment in its deteriorating energy infrastructure, competition from the United States, dwindling production from older fields, and the lack of new oil finds, especially in the Arctic area, have lessened Moscow's ability to use energy as a weapon of influence.

The sanctions, due to the conflict over Ukraine, proved to have significant effects on an already fragile Russian economic sector. The impact of dramatic decreases in imports and exports, lackluster innovation, lack of investment, or any overarching economic reform, along with endemic corruption caused a long-term economic contraction. As the major cities tried to improve their economies, especially Moscow and St. Petersburg, the rural regions declined

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precipitously, as villages depopulated and social and infrastructure needs went unaddressed. This has only served to engender renewed militancy, especially in the North Caucasus region, and increased calls for autonomy in the eastern regions. The government worked to protect the elite class within the major cities at the expense of the lower class. Widespread areas suffer from high unemployment, poor governance, infrastructure decay, and related social problems. While state control continued to attempt to support basic social services, food security, and public welfare, it has found the need overwhelming and its ability to deal with it systemically inadequate. One moderating factor is a consequence of continuing global climate change has been the gradual opening up of fertile farmlands across the southern most portions of northern areas, portending the potential future creation of a large expansion of the agricultural sector in that region over succeeding generations.

Moscow's failure to diversify its economy beyond the energy sector has made it vulnerable to fluctuations in the global energy market. New discoveries have failed to materialize, and new, unexploited oil reserves discovered in the Baltic Sea remain contested by the Baltic States. With the shrinking polar icecaps, Russian energy companies have begun preparing for increased Arctic exploration. Current production rates from older fields have continued to decline, with the real prospect that these fields will cease active production in the not too distant future.

Philosophically, Vladimir Putin has been determined to return the Russian Federation to greatness and protect it from perceived western threats, in part through regaining dominant influence within the old Soviet states. Under Putin, Russia's national mindset remained underpinned by suspicion of Chinese encroachment in the east, and its historic distrust of the West. Putin has demonstrated many times that he takes a different view of the world than that of most western nations, especially the United States. Bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington are as polarized now as they were during the Ukrainian crisis and the Cold War.

Putin began a concerted effort to secure the allegiance of like-minded eastern European nations, such as Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova, into Moscow's sphere of influence. In order to secure their allegiance and tie them ever tighter to Russia, he formed the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), his answer to the EU, with Kazakhstan and Belarus joining Russia as founding members. However, despite significant pressure and thinly veiled threats that turned into aggressive actions of Moscow's seizure and annexation of the Crimean peninsula, Ukraine and Moldova both stood their ground, rejected the EEU, and aligned themselves with the EU and the West.

Meanwhile Russia's Baltic Sea Oblast of Kaliningrad, home to a large percentage of the economic activity that fuels the Russian energy sector, has become increasingly alienated from the motherland. While employment levels have remained strong, there has been little real growth in personal income or standards of living in the last two decades. The outward looking Kaliningraders have become increasingly envious of the relative prosperity of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. One of the side effects of Russian policy towards Kaliningrad is a growing political movement that emphasizes the unique identity of "Kaliningraders." The current Kaliningraders have begun to weave the East Prussian story into their vision of a more prosperous future.

In contrast to the EU's overall decline in military capability over the past 15-20 years, Russia has funneled significant revenues into modernizing and streamlining its military. The Putin government has spared little expense to correct military deficiencies identified during conflicts in

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2008 and 2014. These renewed capabilities have allowed Russia to flex its political muscle on the regional and global stage. This exemplifies Putin's ability to gauge the West's lack of resolve and coercively undermine EU objectives in Eastern Europe, and his willingness to use renewed Russian military strength to exploit situations whenever and wherever he sees fit.

However, NATO members such as Poland are more wary of Russia and work to counter Moscow's plays for power in Eastern Europe. Russia resents Poland's strong diplomatic and military ties with the United States, particularly the stationing of U.S. military forces and other assets in Poland. Further, Warsaw has repeatedly thumbed its nose at Moscow over the past decade by vetoing EU measures to expand cooperation with Russia.

In Moscow's view, NATO politicians have consistently meddled in their "near abroad," successfully luring Commonwealth of Independent States member nations to join the western alliance. Putin has openly stated his hostility towards NATO policies in the past, and he has taken a strong line towards any type of U.S. or NATO exercises and physical deployments, such as the NATO presence in Poland and other Eastern European nations. Moscow is working to fracture their collective resolve by separating the Central and Western European NATO countries from the Baltic and Eastern European NATO members.

Since the bulk of the Russia's population resides in the western portion of the nation, most of Russia's political focus is to the west, but it has also uneasily watched China to the east. Russia and China formalized their 4,300-mile common border over 20 years ago in order to improve relations and facilitate travel between the two nations. The pending deployment of "Arctic Class" cargo and bulk petroleum ships will open the northern Russian energy fields to nearly year round production with delivery primarily expected to focus on the growing Chinese demand. Moscow has come to depend on Beijing's support on many international issues and in the UN Security Council. Approximately 600,000 ethnic Chinese have immigrated, both legally and illegally, into Russia's thinly populated border regions to fill the need for cheap, unskilled labor. More than half of the Chinese immigrants have settled in Amur Oblast, where they make up nearly 50% of the population. This large influx of Chinese has only hastened the migration of large portions ethnic Russian population out of the oblast and created the potential for markedly increased ethnic tensions within the region.

Along with Russia's external challenges, it also has some serious internal problems: a rapidly declining ethnic population, growing fear of foreigners, and the fact that increasingly large numbers of Russian citizens live in poverty. Along with the endemic scourge of alcoholism, drug addiction is on the rise and an HIV/AIDS epidemic has spread throughout the nation. These social problems represent significant sources of risk for Russia over the medium- to long-term.

#### **The Baltic Region**

There has been growing concern about the vulnerability of these three small nations – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Relations between Moscow and the Baltic States have been tense ever since all three nations followed Poland's lead to join NATO. Russia has used political and ethnic pressure in attempts to regain a military presence in the three republics and to lure them away from NATO. Ever since the recent large oil discovery off Kaliningrad, Moscow has pushed claims that it has sovereignty over extensive areas in Baltic waters that contain extractable gas and oil reserves. All three Baltic States have disputed the validity of these Russian claims, but

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increasing demands for energy supplies within the EU has minimized support for them among their European allies.

A major issue that Moscow seeks to exploit is the discovery of oil reserves in the Baltic Sea. The initial discovery of the reserves occurred in 2019, after 18 months of drilling and testing. The find, located in a region approximately 15 miles off the Kaliningrad region's Kursh zone, is the largest discovery in the Baltic region in a generation, with an estimated 12-15 billion barrels located throughout several fields. Although discovered in a region just off of the Kaliningrad Oblast, in an area where Russia already had oil platforms established, there are significant points of contention regarding exploration and drilling as the Kursh zone is a natural resort territory under UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) protection. Once the value of the find was confirmed, Lithuania challenged Russian drilling rights, as the fields in question straddle the extended border between the two countries.

#### **Estonia**

This small nation has matured into a vibrant democracy. Certain governance challenges remain; primarily among those are high crime rates, significant economic difficulties, and increasing tensions arising from the large ethnic Russian minority. Estonia is firmly committed to being an active member in both NATO and the EU. Although Estonia has a small military force, it has developed niche capabilities in peacekeeping, minesweeping, and building advanced air surveillance systems. The NATO cyber center-of-excellence is located in Estonia. Their wariness of Russian cyber capability has brought together NATO's front line cyber professionals to develop strategies and policies to counter any Russian attack.

Estonia's relations with Moscow have become increasingly tense, primarily due to Estonia's treatment of its large ethnic-Russian population and Tallinn's perception of its Soviet history as a period of occupation. Russia continues to bring up the topic of what it terms "human rights abuses" against "Russian-speakers." A concern in recent years, Moscow has bestowed Russian citizenship and issued passports to a significant number of Estonia's ethnic Russian population.

Estonia blames Russia for massive cyber-attacks against economic and media targets over the past year. Tallinn equates Moscow's cyber-attacks with military aggression, which drove them to request assistance from NATO. The alliance sent a specialized cyber-defense unit to Estonia to help thwart further attacks. Further, NATO increased the number of aircraft and support personnel dedicated to patrolling Baltic airspace in an effort to counter Russia's underhanded aggression towards Estonia. Diplomatic tensions are likely to continue in the near-term.

#### **Latvia**

Of the three Baltic States, Latvia is in the most precarious situation. Latvia, like Estonia, continues to face criticism from Russia regarding the treatment of its large ethnic-Russian population. This leads to periodic tit-for-tat exchanges of rhetoric, which Latvia tries to overcome by exercising its own limited political weight on the international scene. Nevertheless, with NATO and the EU membership, Latvia's external relations have become much more secure.

Domestically Latvia suffers from a similar range of problems as other former communist states such as corruption and political instability as the country struggles to develop into a mature democracy. The country has seen number of governments collapse outside of the scheduled



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election cycle. This was especially true at the end of the past decade as the country faced severe financial crises leading to large-scale protests. The country faced seven years of economic turbulence before it stabilized in 2023.

#### **Lithuania**

Of the Baltic countries, Lithuania has been the staunchest supporter of NATO having provided troops to the NATO mission. Today, while their army is small, it is well trained and experienced. The pursuit of economic stability is somewhat undermined by the constant push and pull of political parties, money laundering and low level organized crime.

Externally, Lithuania's relations with its neighboring Baltic States, Latvia and Estonia, are generally good, although minor disputes occasionally develop over international issues. The three Baltic States have cooperated militarily in some joint peacekeeping ventures. Poland has become one of Lithuania's closest allies harkening back to the former Polish-Lithuanian Union. Belarusian and Lithuanian relations remain tense. The proximity of the Belarusian border to Vilnius, the Belarusian military, and Belarusian President Lukashenka's close relationship to Russian President Putin are ongoing concerns for Lithuania.

Relations with the Russian Federation are very fragile due to Lithuania's dependence on Russian natural gas. The Russian state-owned gas corporation, Gazprom, has previously presented large bills for payment that Lithuania has disputed. Additionally, Gazprom owns a non-controlling stake in Lietuvos Dujos (Lithuanian Gas), a long-running source of tension. Russia had unresolved financial and property issues with Lithuania and the other Baltic states, concluding that the three countries' share of former Soviet Union debt came to over US\$3 billion. Though Baltic politicians ridiculed the report, it still serves to feed Lithuania's general distrust of Russia.

Further tensions exist due to Russia's declaration of oil and gas rights in the Baltic Sea where there are several older refineries and petroleum and gas transit pipelines. Russia plans to grow a substantial hydrocarbon infrastructure and port business on and off shore in Kaliningrad, but Lithuania, with the support of the other Baltic States, holds that Russia's claims and plans are a threat to freedom of navigation, fishing, and the ecosystem in the Baltic Sea.

One of the defense benefits Lithuania has realized since joining NATO is air-policing missions conducted by other NATO nations for the Baltic States. The mission footprint includes fighter aircraft and support personnel at Zokniai Air Base near the northern Lithuanian city of Siauliai. Under the agreement, NATO member states deploy aircraft to patrol the Baltic States airspace on six-month rotations. Contributing states thus far are Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom, and the United States. Belgium will provide support for the first half of 2027 followed by Canada.

#### **Belarus**

Belarus remains under the thumb of the authoritarian regime of President Viktor Lukashenko, who succeeded his father in 2019. There is minimal economic reform and politically, there is active suppression of opposition activity with leaders routinely jailed, and protest marches often brutally broken up by the police. Belarus remains a staunch ally of Moscow. The two nations have numerous bilateral connections and agreements. Lukashenka's regime remains largely isolated from the rest of Europe, employing a foreign policy based on its political, economic, and

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military ties with Russia. Further, Viktor Lukashenka is loyal to President Putin, as his political survival is dependent on Russian power.

The Belarusian armed forces are relatively small but robust when compared to two of their western neighbors, Latvia and Lithuania. The cornerstone of Minsk's defense policy is its alliance with Russia. The joint Russian-Belarusian integrated regional air defense network, the Volga-early warning radar system in Baranavichy, Brest Oblast, is under the control of the Russian Space Forces and can track missiles and objects in space up to 4,000 km away. The radar is capable of scanning the airspace through western and northwestern Russia and well into Western Europe. The annual ZAPAD exercise series remains the centerpiece of Russian and Belarusian military cooperation. Hosted alternately in each country, the 2027 exercise takes place in Belarus.

#### **Poland**

A committed member of NATO, Poland is still concerned with what it perceives as Moscow's overarching philosophy of forcing former Warsaw Pact nations back into the Russian sphere of influence. This drives Poland's encouragement of NATO and U.S. involvement in eastern European security issues and it has increased its defense posture along the Alliance's eastern corridor. These concerns prompted Warsaw to conclude two basing agreements with the United States, the first outside of Lublin, near the Ukraine-Belarus border, and the second just east of Lomza, south of the border with Lithuania. Each base is home to rotating brigade combat teams. Warsaw is committed to promoting a pro-Western orientation in neighboring Belarus and supporting Ukraine's struggle against the Russian Federation.

Beginning in December of 2022 the North Atlantic Council approved increased force deployments of the NATO Response Force (NRF) to Poland. The air component is composed of U.S. Global Hawks and C-130s, Polish and Dutch F-16s, and Spanish C-16s. The land component is a United Kingdom brigade combat team normally assigned to the NRF. These forces are based at Minsk Mazowiecki air base and Elblag army base, respectively. Additionally, the United States followed through on a pledge to NATO and based an Aegis Ashore Battery in northern Poland in 2018, the twin of the Aegis Ashore facility that opened in Romania in 2016. As a counter, Moscow has deployed military assets in Belarus, and moved the nuclear-capable Iskander-M ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad.

Poland has gradually reduced its dependence on Russian oil from 70% to 33% by 2025. Of that amount, less than 30% comes via Ukraine while the majority comes via Belarus. Poland opened two nuclear power plants in the past five years. The new plants are located in Tarnowiec and Klempicz. Poland's energy policy ensures that any initiation by Russia to cut off energy supplies would not cripple them, even though it would have a slightly more adverse effect on the rest of Europe. Economically, the nation's relatively stable banking system and low unemployment rate have cushioned the country from most of the effects of global finance problems.

#### **Nordic Region**

Sweden's accession into NATO brought with it turmoil in the Nordic Council. Finland, now the only non-NATO entity, is under increased Russian pressure to align with them.

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#### **Norway**

Decades of energy production and austere fiscal planning has created the most stable socialist country within Europe. Continued exploration along its Northern coast has provided additional oil and natural gas claims. The melting Arctic ice cap has opened up shorter sea transit corridors to China and Japan. Disputes with Russia over transit passage fees and freedom of navigation have continued to increase with the ever-growing economic surge due to these new trade routes. Differences between the Nordic Council, EU, and NATO regarding the Arctic region has placed a strain on Norway's relationship with its European allies. Oslo feels that the Nordic Council should regulate control of the Arctic trade routes. The EU feels that by allowing the Nordic Council to regulate the trade routes that not all EU member nations will benefit. Additionally, NATO is adamant for increased control due to Russian posturing and the potential of increased militarization of the Arctic.

#### **Sweden**

A shift in political power from the center-left Social Democrats and Green Party to more conservative outlook led to the 2022 vote to join NATO. Sweden, traditionally a neutral player, has been increasingly skeptical of growing Russian military strength. A number of isolated incidents of Russian submarine intrusions and Russian aircraft overflights in the past decade cemented the pro-NATO movement. In 2024, Sweden officially allied with NATO, which caused consternation with neighbor Finland. However, both nations work closely together in the Nordic Council.

#### **Finland**

Historically, Finland has had closer ties with Russia than with its Nordic neighbors. With NATO inclusion of Sweden in 2024, Finland no longer has a neutral buffer to its West. Pressure from Russia on Finnish politics, due to the distance from NATO countries, has strained their special relationship. This has divided the Finns, who hold close cultural ties with Russia, but also a large Swedish minority that favors the West. Since Russia has focused its belligerence against other regions in their near abroad, Finland, on Russia's Northern flank, has tried to remain quiet.

Finland has struggled with the repeated economic bailouts of Greece, Italy, and Spain. The nation has undergone an ongoing debate on whether to withdraw from the Euro to return to the Markka, and a proposed referendum to resolve that question may come to fruition in 2028.

#### **Bosnia-Herzegovina**

While the Dayton Accords allowed the creation of a peaceful, multiethnic state, it did so by emplacing a complex form of governance that has proven increasingly unresponsive to the needs of the general populace while protecting those elites that hold real power. This elite class manipulates the complex governmental system and enabling them to rule with virtual autonomy. However, as government gridlock increased, the economic situation worsened.

The overall situation in the country returned to peaceful coexistence, to such an extent that, at the request of Bosnia-Herzegovinian (BiH) government and with the acquiescence of its three ethnic communities, the UN agreed to terminate its two missions – the EU Police Mission (EUPM) and EUFOR ALTHEA, the EU military mission – at the end of 2019. However, this seeming peace

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obscured what was taking place within almost every community, as the vast majority of people quietly and peacefully separated their communities along ethnic lines. Even in Brčko, once celebrated as model of ethnic coexistence, over time the area quietly developed increasingly pure ethnic sectors, as Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs migrated back to their old communities or built new ones, hardening ethnic divides.

Ethnic pressure was less of a factor in the Republika Srpska where the Dayton Accords had awarded the Serbs the vast majority of the territory they had already conquered and ethnically cleaned (except for the multi-ethnic Brčko region which separates eastern and western halves of Srpska), something that remains a sticking point for Bosniaks and Croats. Current ethnic pressure between Bosniaks and Croats is most evident. In Mostar, an ancient city in the south sitting astride the Neretva River, these tensions have created a potential powder keg. Ethnically divided, with Croats residing on the west side of the river that marks the eastern most point of the Croat enclave in BiH, and Bosniaks on the east side near the southern most limit of the Bosniak enclave. Officially, under the Dayton accords, Mostar resides completely inside the expanded Croat enclave of Canton #7, Hercegovackoneretvanski. However, this rationale matters little to the Mostar Bosniaks trapped in the Croat area that may become part of a new Croatian nation, or of Croatia, should the BiH split.

BiH efforts to move forward with the EU accession process have been complicated by demands that the nation meet certain additional requirements; specifically implementation the European Court of Human Rights judgment in the Sejdic-Finci case regarding the discrimination against citizens based on ethnicity. BiH has also failed meet a second demand, that it set up an EU coordination mechanism across the different levels and branches of the federal, regional, cantonal, and local governments. Due to Sarajevo's failure to meet these requirements, the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), remains dormant, leaving relations with the EU at the Interim Agreement level. This situation has only added to the frustrations of the vast majority of ordinary Bosnians, especially as they watched Serbia and Montenegro join Croatia and Slovenia as EU member states.

#### **Bulgaria**

Bulgaria has struggled with their economy, in particular the banking sector. EU inaction forced Sofia to look to the Russian Federation for assistance, and Russian banks bought up most of Bulgarian debt, pulling it ever closer to the Russian sphere of influence. In 2024, this and other factors caused the Bulgarian government to withdraw its nation from the EU, and join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. EU and U.S. objections to the South Stream pipeline project, delivering gas from Russia to Europe under the Black Sea, only exacerbated the situation. The objections stemmed from the fact that the diversion of energy products through South Stream instead of through pipelines already transiting Ukrainian territory deprived the Ukraine economy 50% of the transit fees. However, Sofia countered that it needed the revenue in order to help shore up its own weak economic situation.

#### **Romania**

In mid-2016, Romania became host to the first Aegis Ashore installation, at the Deveselu airfield, near the Bulgarian border. The battery permanently stations a land based anti-missile capability focused on threats emerging from the south and east, from both Iran and Russia.

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Romanians consider the installation a point of national pride and tout it as a prime example of their full support to NATO.

#### **Greece**

Greece, led by Antonis Samaras, struggled with EU imposed reforms, failing to achieve fully the goals imposed by the EU. This lapse caused the EU to force Greece out of the Eurozone. Over the years, anti-democratic sentiment increasingly took root within the nation's electorate, which saw growing resentment of the EU and a significant rise in support of older Marxist/socialist philosophies. In 2020, this culminated in an election victory for the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) candidate Dimitris Koutsoumbas over the New Democracy (ND) party candidate Dora Bakoyannis. Since then relations between Greece and Russia have grown significantly. In 2022, Athens and Moscow signed a long-term naval basing agreement, giving Russia a second naval base in the Mediterranean.

#### **Turkey**

Turkey continues to struggle with its secular versus religious identity. Following the failed 2016 coup attempt, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was able to maintain and consolidate power around the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP). Erdoğan moved the AKP toward a conservative, autocratic, and Islamist leaning political party over the course of the following few years reversing the transformation into a truly democratic nation. With the purge of the military, long known as the guardian of Atatürk's secular vision, Erdoğan continued to consolidate power. In the run up to the 2024 elections, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (of the Nationalist Movement Party *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – MHP) was able to cobble together a more secular, western-leaning coalition, which included Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), that successfully challenge Erdoğan for the presidency and control of the parliament. After Erdoğan's retirement and Kılıçdaroğlu assumption of the Presidency, Ankara has steered a slow and careful course back to efforts to create a western-style liberal democracy.

Economically Turkey continued to thrive; in 2025 becoming the twelfth largest in terms of GDP. It achieved this without ever becoming an EU member. The governments of France, Germany, and Austria had remained opposed to full Turkish membership, especially given Ankara's autocratic course, and its continued support of Azerbaijan against Armenia in the stalled conflict over the Azeri region of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the post-Erdogan government finally reached a peace agreement with Kurdish leaders, putting an end to that internal conflict. The new government supported the Turkish Cypriot leaders in the 2025 resolution of the Cyprus conflict. With these resolutions in hand, Turkish leaders feel that there is a strong case for EU membership. Even so, many European governments are concerned about accepting an EU member state that directly borders on a continuously unstable Middle East region.

Noting Iran's expansion of regional influence, Turkish leaders began a systematic campaign to build a regional influence in order to counter-balance Tehran's radical and destabilizing agenda. Ankara clearly seeks to build regional influence as a power player on the Arabic/Moslem stage. If successful, this would place Turkey in direct competition with Russia in most economic sectors while challenging Iranian influence in the region.

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Turkey remains a loyal member of NATO, and values its traditional alliance with the United States. Turkish leaders have privately expressed concern over the organization's reciprocal loyalty to defend Turkish interests in a confrontation with Russia. The toothlessness displayed by the United States and NATO during the Russian incursion into Georgia, takeover of the Crimea, and adventurism in eastern Ukraine and Syria still rankles. The nuclear umbrella, which had been a pillar of Turkish defense policy, remains in question in Turkish military and political circles.

Ankara, in a perceived need to achieve parity with other major regional powers, embarked on an aggressive nuclear energy and weapons program, which brought her first nuclear power station on line at Buyukesceli Hamlet of Gulnar in the Southern Mersin Province in 2021 and their first warheads in 2023. Because Turkey has remained a steadfast member of NATO, and given Iran's own nuclear program, European allies have been hesitant to confront Turkey openly over this initiative. Turkey has repeatedly stated that she does not intend to change the status quo, but merely wants to be prepared to react if the status quo changes around her. Turkey has avoided conflicting with the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and other anti-proliferation regimes by welcoming observers from any acknowledged nuclear power.

#### **Armenia**

Armenia is a small nation within a volatile, unfriendly region. With an overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian population, geographically Armenia is hemmed in to the west by Islamic Turkey, their historic enemy; on the east by Islamic Azerbaijan, an ally of Turkey; to the south by Islamic Iran; and to the north by Georgia, which provides a geographic link to Russia. Further exacerbating their situation is its conflict with Azerbaijan over the Armenian ethnic region in western Azerbaijan known as Nagorno-Karabakh (NK). Since 1994, there has been a cease-fire, but the region remains a potential conflict zone. The Armenians increased their isolation as the Azerbaijan and Turkey borders have been closed since the annexation of NK, thus limiting their outlets for trade and commerce. The Russian Federation has remained an ardent ally with a Russian garrison stationed within Armenian borders. Armenia and Russia have a mutual defense treaty that commits Russia to come to the defense of Armenia if attacked by a non-Commonwealth of Independent States nation.

Through the Russian-led EEU, Russian government and business entities now dominate the Armenian economic sector. Despite rejecting an EU Association Agreement in favor of joining the EEU, Yerevan continued to pursue reforms sought by the EU through their European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) programs. Armenia has made considerable progress on its ENP Action Plan and follow-on initiatives when compare to Azerbaijan. This progress includes approving sets of reforms that bring their constitution significantly closer to European norms, moving the country closer to western standards of government, and the goal of becoming a Western-style democracy.

Yerevan, much to Moscow's chagrin, remains actively involved in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP). Armenia's relations with the United States are cordial, and the United States is supportive of Yerevan's interest in and progress towards increased integration with the West. This is due in part to the influence of the Armenian Diaspora, which still has significant influence within Russia, France, and especially the United States. Many see the continued warming of Armenia's relations with the West as an Armenian hedge against Russia's aggressive efforts to increase its influence within former Soviet states.

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Yet, even despite its overtures to the West, Armenia continues to cultivate its long-standing ties with Russia, especially in regard to security, given its continued conflict and tenuous cease-fire with neighboring Azerbaijan over the NK region. While Armenia continues to take aggressive measures to strengthen its military, Russia also increased the size of its military garrison, based near the Armenian city of Gyumri, from 3500 to over 5000 soldiers. Due to its geographic position, Armenia's relations with its southern neighbor, Iran, rank second only to its relations with Russia. Armenia still values their strategic relationship because of Tehran's influence with Azerbaijan and Russia.

#### **Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan has been the most successful at balancing its relations between the Russian Federation and the West despite almost constant pressure from Moscow. Azerbaijan continues to decline Moscow's offers of Russian pipelines as preferred transit routes for Azerbaijani energy products. This arrangement, in combination with the Central Asian states increasingly cozy and profitable energy market relations with China, allows them to avoid the Russian distribution network altogether. However, relations with Russia have been increasingly stained by Azeri leaders who have set a more historically based nationalistic agenda that involves a reemphasis on the Azeri mutual Persian and Turkic heritage, and a renewed emphasis on their natural allegiance with both Turkey and Iran. Iran's ethnic Azeri population is over twice the size of the entire population of Azerbaijan.

Because of its abundant energy resources, Baku is courted by Turkey, Russia, Iran, Southeast Asian and Western nations, with American, British, and Chinese companies investing heavily in development of both gas and oil exploration and extraction. Azerbaijan, in concert with the Central Asian states and Turkey, has built the Trans-Caspian pipeline to funnel Central Asian energy products across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and on to Turkey through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Eserum (BTE) gas pipelines. The final stage of this system is the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) that transits these energy products from Turkey to southern European markets. This pipeline system has become increasingly important to Turkey and Europe as a way to lessen dependence on a Russia that is increasingly at odds with the West. Moscow's failure to scuttle the construction of the Trans-Caspian and TAP pipelines has only exacerbated already strained relations. In response, in 2020 Moscow began the deportation of Azerbaijani immigrants, with some 50,000 immigrants forced to return to Azerbaijan thus far.

Yet, even though Azerbaijan's main economic customers are western liberal democracies, its leaders have steadfastly held to its decidedly undemocratic form of governance. Although elections are conducted according to the standards outlined by the EU and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the lack of term limits, the suppression of the opposition, government control of the media, suppression of public protests, and the deference of the legislature to the executive, ensure what can only be described as an autocratic government.

Azerbaijan has enjoyed significant economic growth due to its abundant energy resources. The country's GDP has averaged roughly 8% growth per year from 2009 to 2022. Older crude oil reserves have depleted, but energy production has remained steady, as new discoveries in the Caspian seabed have shifted exploitation from oil to natural gas. Additionally, collection of transit fees from the Central Asian natural gas through the Trans-Caspian and BTC/E pipelines

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has proved lucrative. Wealth distribution continues to be disproportional, as approximately 45% of the population continue to live below the poverty line, and corruption remains endemic.

Baku continues its efforts to join NATO and the EU despite Russian objections. Azerbaijan remains actively involved in NATO's PfP and the EU's ENP programs, and continues to receive U.S. military training support. U.S. support has evolved into a permanent part of their efforts to modernize the Azerbaijani military and bring it in line with Western standards. Azerbaijan has used its energy to equip and rehabilitate its armed forces. Azerbaijan has concluded a mutual defense pact with Turkey; a response to the long-standing Armenian-Russian mutual defense pact, a major move in Turkey's pursuit of increased direct military involvement in Azerbaijan as a counter to continued Russian military presence in the South Caucasus region.

The United States wants bring some balance to what remains a volatile situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh by simultaneously providing significant training and exercise forces to both countries. However, Washington has been hesitant to reinforce Azeri leaders due to continuing concerns within both Congress and the White House about the autocratic and repressive nature of Azerbaijan's government.

The loss of NK was a humiliation, and is the issue that has driven the development of its significant Azerbaijani military capability. The deeply ingrained national mentality is that Azerbaijani territories are under Armenian occupation and must be reclaimed through military force. The lack of a settlement to the NK situation and any efforts by the country's political leadership to prepare the nation for a negotiated settlement has only served to harden public sentiment in favor of a military solution.

#### **Georgia**

Russia has increasingly flexed its political, economic, and military muscle to influence events in the Caucasus. The province of South Ossetia voted to unite with its sister Russian province of North Ossetia, thus making South Ossetia part of the Russian Federation, giving Russia another presence on the south side of the Caucasus Mountains. The Georgian province of Abkhazia, which also lies south of the Caucasus Mountains, retains its independence from Georgia, but remains an unrecognized state almost fully dependent on the Russian Federation. It hosts two Russian bases on its territory: an army base outside Tqvarceli and a naval base at Sukhumi. The Georgian government adamantly refuses to recognize the present status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, officially declaring them occupied territories; however, privately most Georgian politicians accept that Georgia will probably never regain control of these provinces.

Having suffered through the incursion of Russian forces, Georgia has done well in its ongoing efforts to emancipate itself from Russia. The Russo-Georgian War of August 2008, along with restrictive energy policies, has been indicative of Moscow's determination to maintain its dominant position regarding its southern neighbor and was illustrative of its determination to be the prevailing influence within the entire South Caucasus region. The brief war demonstrated the limitations of an alliance with the United States and NATO. Georgia quickly recovered from the conflict and reaffirmed its determination to maintain its freedom from Russian influence and control. Despite the limitations between the United States and NATO, Georgia has remained involved in NATO's PfP and the EU's ENP programs, as well as the Turkish-led Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP).



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Despite President Giorgi Margvelashvili's pro-Russian leanings, he worked with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Parliament to advance the reformation of Georgia's previously poor image. Margvelashvili was able to improve Tbilisi's relations with Moscow while also accelerating Georgia's pursuit of western integration. In fact, less than one year in office Margvelashvili signed an Association Agreement with the EU, instead of following neighboring Armenia in joining the Russian-led ECU/EEU. Georgia formally entered the EU in 2020.

For his part, Garibashvili pushed through Parliament an aggressive reform program that strongly punished corrupt officials and businessmen, so much so that by 2019, Georgia had become one of the least corrupt of the post-Soviet states. In addition, the BTC and BTE oil and gas pipelines have helped to limit Georgia's energy dependence on Russia, while simultaneously bringing in badly needed transit revenue. The Georgian government has forged stronger relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey as part of the process of pulling their nation out from under the influence of an overbearing Moscow. Improved relationships with Ankara have opened up educational and employment opportunities in Turkey for Georgians who previously could only have such opportunities in Russia and further undermining Russian influence.

## **MIDDLE EAST**

### **Overview**

In 2026, the United States continues to see the Middle East as vital to its interests, as the stability of global energy markets remains dependent on regional security. Most Americans, however, no longer want to see "boots on the ground" in conflict areas and question continued U.S. involvement. Traditional U.S. allies, recognizing the impact of American military drawdowns and an economically and militarily resurgent Iran, have adopted a greater role for themselves in security operations.

While there has been no proof of Iranian violations of their obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015, many intelligence officials believe Iran maintains – or has access to – a small stockpile of nuclear warheads and cooperates with North Korea to ensure a rapid and full restoration of its programs after 2030. While the Iranian economy has experienced notable diversification and growth since the lifting of sanctions, the Iranian public still harbors immense resentment toward the United States, Israel, and neighboring Sunni states for its previous hardships. Iran is the region's most vocal U.S. critic, blaming it for the collapse of regional security and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

To critics of U.S. foreign policy, new de facto borders in Iraq highlight the futility of trying to keep regional governments intact. In 2020, the Kurdish governorates of Iraq not only seceded from Baghdad but also incorporated the governorate of Kirkuk. As for Syria, Damascus continues to battle the insurgent threat, and Syrian and Kurdish refugees numbering in the millions strain neighboring governments.

Iran's new economic power, military recapitalization, and expanded influence, along with mistrust concerning its likely post-JCPOA nuclear weapons program, have caused great regional concern. Members of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (originally known as the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC) have pledged to coordinate their security and come to each other's assistance in the event of an attack. However, results from the Saudi Arabian-led campaign in Yemen have been disappointing, and full military integration remains a challenge.

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due to member states having purchased disparate weapon systems. Additionally, the reluctance of some GCC members to work fully together and political differences between members has negatively affected unity of effort. For example, a rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar came to a head in 2014 over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and extremists in Libya. This support caused Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to recall their ambassadors from Qatar. Since then, GCC members have frequently acted as blocs with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE in alignment against Qatar, with Kuwait and Oman maintaining a more non-aligned stance.

Along with the GCC framework, most GCC members maintain bilateral security guarantees with the United States and see the presence of U.S. bases as a hedge against Iran. Bahrain hosts the U.S. 5th Fleet; Qatar hosts the U.S. Central Command's Forward Command Center and Combined Air Operations Center; Kuwait and Qatar host two brigade sets in caretaker status; the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has close ties with the U.S. and French militaries; and Oman allows generous basing options for the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

In addition to maintaining the above access arrangements, several friendly Gulf countries have enhanced their military arsenals over the past decade through weapons purchases from the United States and many other Western nations. Notably, the UAE has purchased THAAD and Patriot missiles, Apache and Chinook helicopters, and Globemaster and Hercules transports while Saudi Arabia has upgraded its Patriot missiles and Eagle fighter aircraft.

Despite many difficulties, peace agreements between Israel and Jordan (1994), and Israel and Egypt (1979) remain in effect.



### The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

ISIS, a Salafi jihadist militant group that evolved from the Sunni insurgency following the defeat of Saddam Hussein's government in 2003, has long proclaimed itself a global caliphate. While the United Nations, various governments, and mainstream Muslims reject its claims of legitimacy, the movement has nevertheless grown from its original base in western Iraq and eastern Syria, and now holds territory in an area spanning from Libya to Pakistan. ISIS inspires – if not coordinates with and supports – like-minded cells and terrorist groups worldwide, and has attracted recruits from nearly every nation.

ISIS's skills at what has become known as “Gray Zone Conflict” became apparent in 2014, when it drove Iraqi government forces out of key cities in western Iraq and captured key cities, including Mosul. Adept at social media, ISIS is widely known for its videos of beheadings of soldiers and civilians including journalists and aid workers, and its destruction of cultural heritage sites. The United Nations holds ISIS responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes, and Amnesty International has charged the group with ethnic cleansing on an "historic

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scale.” ISIS coerces support from civilians in the regions under its control, and recruits heavily from communities sheltering refugees and displaced civilians.

Although estimates are by no means definitive, analysts believe ISIS to number anywhere between 75,000 and 100,000 not counting small cells and “lone wolves” operating outside of ISIS-controlled territories. ISIS’s High Command is now based in the eastern Syrian city of Deir Zzor, having retreated from Raqqa after a series of effective Syrian government offensives. ISIS High Command, which is most involved in providing ideological direction and coordinating media and cyber support for the movement, has become increasingly critical of the Turkish government and its failures to implement Sharia law and oust Western influence.



### Kurdistan

Baghdad’s inability to provide security within its own borders prompted the former KRG to seek full independence and incorporate the governorate of Kirkuk. Most nations, including the United States, have established diplomatic relations with Kurdistan; notably Syria, Iraq, Iran, Russia, and China have not. Kurdistan’s strongest economic relations are with Turkey, to whom it exports oil from the massive reserves southwest of the city of Kirkuk. Additional oil and natural gas reserves were discovered in the region in 2020, increasing Kurdistan’s potential as an oil exporter.

Irbil, Kurdistan’s capital, advocates an undefined concept of “universal Kurdish



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rights” but refrains from providing material or diplomatic support to Kurdish separatist movements in Iran or Turkey. Owing to its dependence on good relations with Turkey, Irbil defers to Ankara on support to Syria’s Kurds.

#### **Iraq**

During the decade following the 2011 departure and 2014 return of U.S. troops, most members of the international community realized that the vision of a secure, politically unified Iraq was not feasible. The former Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) formally seceded and was recognized by most countries, including the United States.

The ISIS persists as a grave threat by launching attacks from eastern Syria and traditional Sunni strongholds in Anbar, Saladin, and Nineveh governorates. Today, the Iraqi military is especially hard-pressed to defend the city of Mosul, which was finally liberated from the ISIS after a hard-fought Iraqi offensive in 2020. Shortly thereafter, U.S. military advisers once again left Iraq. While politicians touted the Mosul victory as the reason for departure, it was widely known that Iranian influence in Baghdad factored into that decision.

Baghdad's strongest relationships are now with Tehran and Moscow. Iran periodically flies missions against the ISIS, while Baghdad, with Russian assistance, has steadily improved its air capabilities and equipment. The current Prime Minister, Saadiq Abdullah, is under domestic pressure to finally quash the “Sunni rebellion” but also faces growing criticism for relying too heavily on Iran for economic, political, and military support.

#### **Syria**

Syria’s long-standing Alawite regime, backed by Russia and Iran, regained some of the territory lost to Sunni insurgent offensives that began in 2012. Syrian Kurds, who adeptly leveraged U.S. support when it was available, ultimately negotiated and cooperated with the Syrian government in exchange for greater security and autonomy. In defiance of the international community, Russia not only based significant forces near Latakia and Tartus, it also began replenishing many of the weapons systems lost to rebel attacks. Moscow, Damascus, and Tehran all accuse supporters of “moderate” rebel forces of prolonging the civil war, causing millions of deaths, generating a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, and playing into the hands of ISIS terrorists.

#### **Iran**

Iran has been an Islamic Republic since the revolution of 1979, which overthrew the pro-U.S. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The Shi’a clergy that emerged under the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini have maintained power in the country ever since. Unelected institutions including the office of the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the judiciary, and the security services – particularly the Army of the Guards of the Islamic Revolution (commonly referred to as the Revolutionary Guards or IRGC) – remain the true centers of power.

The power of the Supreme Leader, and the institutions surrounding him, has only increased since the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. Under the constitution, the Supreme Leader, appointed for life, has control over the security forces, judicial apparatus, and the media. His inner circle is firmly committed to the strategic objectives of preserving its stranglehold on power; establishing

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regional Iranian hegemony; defending Shi'a Islamic communities in the region; and influencing energy markets by direct and indirect means.

The current Supreme Leader is Ayatollah Sedeq Larijani, a hardline protégé of the late Ayatollah Khamenei and a member of one of Iran's most politically influential families. Like Khamenei, Ayatollah Larijani maintains tight oversight of the Setad, a secretive bureaucracy that by some estimates controls up to 25% of the Iranian economy.

The current President of Iran, Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, was elected in 2021 and again in June of 2025, and has served as the IRGC Air Force senior commander and as the mayor of Tehran. Like his predecessor Hassan Rouhani, he campaigned on reversing the economic damage done by sanctions and ensuring all Iranians would benefit from the country's newfound economic prosperity. Such campaign promises, however, have been difficult to realize due to depressed global oil prices, entrenched government corruption, and the cost of recapitalizing Iran's dilapidated military forces. Nevertheless, Ghalibaf skillfully plays to international and domestic media, and he is currently showcasing his efforts to prosecute corrupt officials who served under former President Rouhani. His critics accuse him of human rights abuses throughout his career, including the ongoing corruption trials.

Despite Iran receiving nuclear-related sanctions relief, residual U.S. sanctions prohibiting Iranian access to the U.S. dollar have impeded Iran's reconnection to the global financial system. There is a sustained risk of the U.S. unilaterally imposing non-nuclear related sanctions affecting non-U.S. companies. Foreign investors face a high risk of unknowingly engaging with IRGC subsidiaries or front companies and thereby breaching residual non-nuclear sanctions.

Most remaining political opposition in Iran falls loosely under what has become known as the New Green Movement, or NGM. NGM's most outspoken leaders, including former presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi (now 84 years old), now live abroad and promote their agendas through the internet and social media. Authorities find it useful to monitor New Green Movement activities through these outlets, clamping down only when the potential for civil disorder becomes too high.

Iran's military doctrine is designed to deter an attack, survive an initial strike, and retaliate against an aggressor. To date, Iran has sought to keep provocative actions below any threshold that would engender a direct military response or termination of the JCPOA. Instability in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen has prompted Iranian military involvement, not only to counter the growing ISIS threat but also to undermine Saudi Arabian leadership and influence. The IRGC, particularly its Quds Brigade (approximately 15,000 personnel), is at the forefront of projecting Iranian influence regionally and globally. Tasks include collecting and exchanging intelligence and providing training and assistance to friendly governments in Syria and Iraq. It also supports proxy forces and dissident groups in locations including Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

Iran, along with the United States, Russia, China, and the EU, signed the JCPOA in July of 2015. Under the agreement, Iran agreed to eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, cut its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98%, and reduce by about two-thirds the number of its centrifuges for at least fifteen years. Over that period (ending in 2030), Iran would only enrich uranium up to 3.67%. Iran also agreed not to build any new uranium-enriching or heavy-water facilities over the same period. Uranium-enrichment activities would be limited to a single facility using first-generation centrifuges for ten years, and other facilities would be converted to



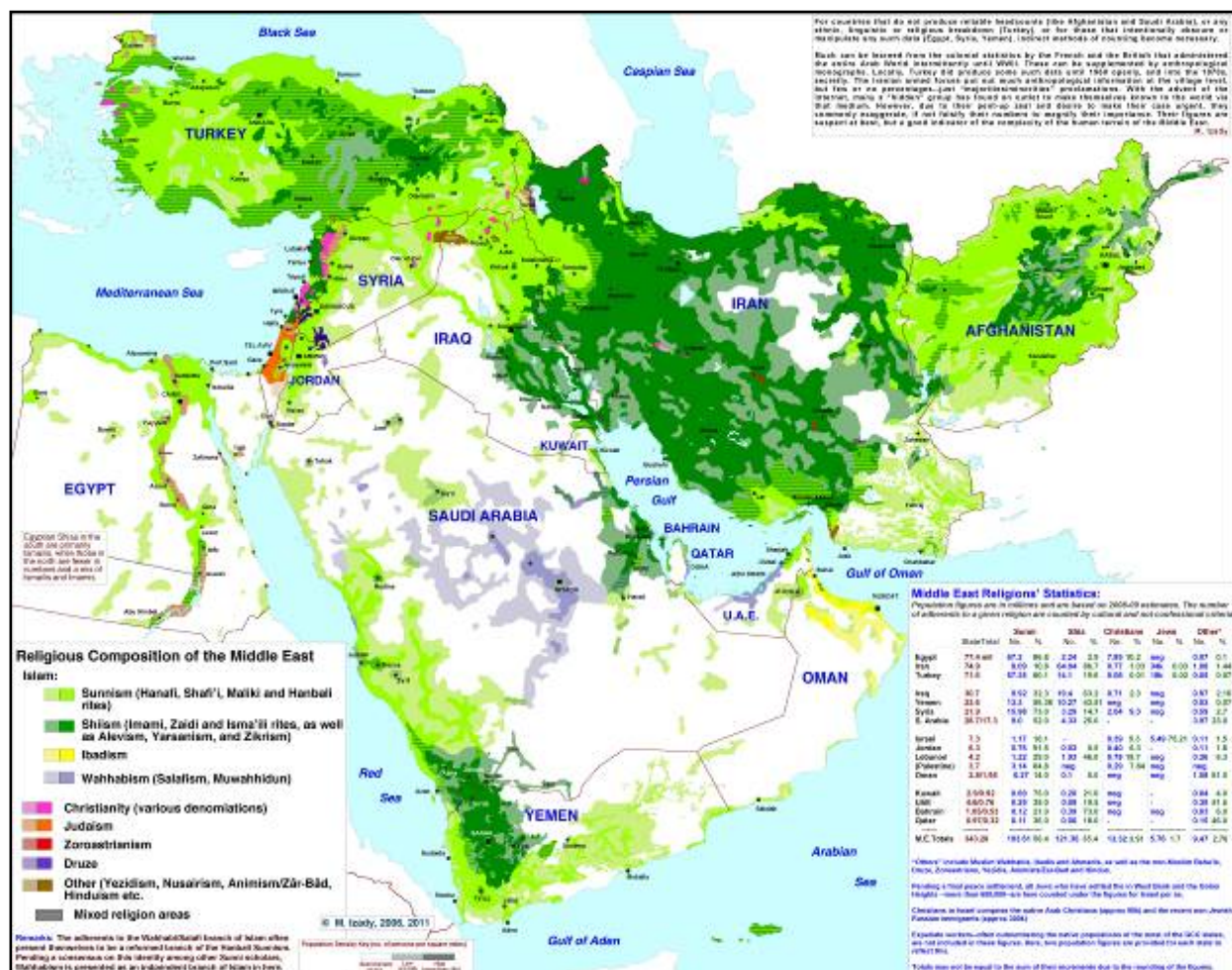
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avoid proliferation risks. Many critics of the agreement, however, have pointed to perceived shortfalls in the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA's) ability to verify Iran's compliance with the agreement.

Although no definitive number is available, intelligence agencies believe Iran may have a small number of warheads on hand for use on its Emad (1056 miles/1700km) medium-range ballistic missiles. Officials also fear that Iranian collaboration with North Korea – a known producer of nuclear warheads – could mean that additional warheads could be delivered to Tehran.

Over the years, Iran has also advanced its conventional military capabilities. A recent Defense Intelligence Agency report noted:

- The subordination of Iran's most strategically significant forces to include its long-range surface to surface and coastal defense missiles under the IRGC.
- The ongoing fielding of a family of indigenously produced solid-fuel missiles that are more accurate than their predecessors and provide reduced warning time.
- The establishment of an Iranian Cyber Army under the IRGC.



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- The IRGC's naval capability to attack vessels in the Strait of Hormuz (SOH) and oil infrastructure in the Caspian Sea.
- The recapitalization of Iran's aged F-14 Tomcat fleet, Iran's multirole fighter aircraft, with multirole SU-30 Flanker long-range strike aircraft, and F-4 Phantoms with SU-35 multirole Flankers, plus extensive Russian training and maintenance support packages.
- The fielding of advanced Russian attack helicopters (MI-35 Hind, MI-28 Havoc, and KA-52 Hokum), particularly to units supporting the Iranian Army's Southwest Command.
- Iran's steady progress in its space program and the construction of a ground-based laser, allegedly to be used for "peaceful space object tracking and research purposes."
- Improvements to Iran's main submarine base at Chah Bahar and modifications allowing Iran's Kilo fleet to employ SS-N-27B/Klub anti-ship missiles.
- The deployment of robust, advanced, and integrated air defenses (to include SA-20s received from Russia).
- A robust expansion of IRGC Qods Force (Jerusalem Corps) field offices throughout the region. Iran uses the Qods Force clandestinely to exert military, political, and economic power to advance its national interests abroad. Its global activities include gathering intelligence; conducting covert diplomacy; providing training, arms, and financial support to surrogate groups and terrorist organizations; and facilitating some of Iran's provision of humanitarian and economic support to Islamic causes.

The report also warned that Iran's neighbors might decide to enhance their own offensive arsenals, or even engage in pre-emptive actions, to neutralize the growing Iranian threat.

#### **Lebanon**

Lebanon's fragmentation along sectarian lines, huge population of Palestinian and Syrian refugees, weak security forces, and struggling economy have historically made its government virtually powerless against outside intervention. Hezbollah, a Shi'a Islamic militant movement formed in the early 1980s, is a recognized political party. While it started as only a small militia, Hezbollah has grown to an organization with seats in the Lebanese government, a radio and a satellite television-station, and programs for social development. It maintains strong support among Lebanon's Shi'a population, and is able to mobilize demonstrations of hundreds of thousands. Hezbollah's anti-Israeli agenda, reliance on Iran, and relationship with the Syrian government make it a significant and destabilizing regional force.

Hezbollah's ongoing support to Damascus and its performance in the 2006 war with Israel have proven it an extremely capable guerrilla army. Its military wing is widely recognized as a proxy force for Iran that could launch an attack on Israel at Tehran's bidding, especially if Iran were attacked. The IRGC's Qods Force supports Hezbollah in Lebanon in the form of guidance, funding, weapons, intelligence, and logistics. The Qods Force, operating training camps for Hezbollah in Iran and in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, has trained thousands of Hezbollah fighters. Hezbollah has operations cells worldwide.

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The mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), deployed in southern Lebanon since the 1970s, does not extend north of the Litani River and UN forces would be unable to counter a rapid deployment of Hezbollah forces into their area of responsibility.

#### **Jordan**

Jordan continues to abide by its 1994 agreement with Israel and the United States, despite the strain of hosting large Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian refugee populations and the lack of progress in resolving Israeli-Palestinian issues. Jordan depends on international assistance to support its refugee camps, which are closely monitored by Jordanian security services. The ISIS threat along Jordan's borders with Syria and Iraq has forced Jordan to coordinate more closely with GCC powers, and to maintain its forces at high states of readiness.

#### **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain the Al-Saud monarchy, ensure dependable revenues from oil and gas exports, secure the country's long borders, and maintain its regional leadership role. While traditionally regarding the United States as a key ally, Saudi Arabia become increasingly wary due to U.S. actions that, in its view, have destabilized the region over the past several decades. Accusations by Congress of Saudi support to terrorism, the United States' decision to invade Iraq and its handling of the post-Iraq conflict environment, U.S. support for Arab Awakening movements, and the U.S. role in negotiating the JCPOA have pushed the Saudi-U.S. administrations further apart and prompted Saudi Arabia to take a more pro-active approach in protecting its national interests.

Saudi Arabia's fear of Iranian regional hegemony and associated risk of losing its regional role – and, therefore, of its internal legitimacy as protector of the Sunnis – increases the risk of direct military involvement in regional conflicts. Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, which dates back to 2015, was intended to restore the Yemeni government, recapture territory seized by the Houthi militia and forces loyal to former Yemeni president Saleh, and counter future Iranian influence. Today, Saudi Arabia's Southern Command hosts a joint task force that secures its southern border, provides training and security assistance to Yemeni forces, and launches air attacks and Special Forces operations against key Houthi targets.

Like other regional Arab monarchies, Saudi Arabia is extremely concerned with the ISIS threat and Iraq's alignment with Iran. Riyadh is infuriated by Iranian accusations of support for ISIS, as Saudi Arabia has had to deploy forces along its borders with Iraq and maintain those forces at heightened states of readiness.

Internally, King Salman's main challenge is to effectively combat the anti-Al Saud jihadist narrative, counter support by individuals to terrorist groups, and manage the threat from homegrown Shi'a militancy. Militancy is increasing among the politically and economically disadvantaged Shi'a in the Eastern province, with pipelines at risk from crude IEDs. Saudi Arabia has also taken steps to defend its critical infrastructure against cyber-threats, having learned from several attacks in 2012. The "Shamoon" virus destroyed data at Aramco, Saudi Arabia's nationally owned oil company, and was ultimately attributed to Iranian-backed hackers.

The Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) is considered the most combat-capable element of the country's armed forces. As the centerpiece of the Saudi defense structure, it has been given the



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highest priority because it is the only armed service with the reach and flexibility to cover vast territory quickly and respond swiftly to any military threat, whether to Saudi Arabia itself or to its allies in the GCC. The RSAF includes Saudi Arabia's 99th Missile Wing, which achieved full operational capability 2021. Having concluded that its aging inventory of DF-3A/CSS-2s (2000km range) and the U.S. defense umbrella were no longer a sufficient hedge against future nuclear-armed Iran, Saudi Arabia purchased its fleet of Hatf-6/Shahen II missiles (2500km range) from Pakistan. Rumors persist of Pakistan's agreement to either supply nuclear warheads to Saudi Arabia or to act as a proxy and employ those warheads on Saudi Arabia's behalf, though such agreements cannot be verified.

#### **Kuwait**

As a small country, Kuwait faces the challenge of being located in a key strategic area alongside more powerful neighbors such as Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

Ever since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, its strategic relationship with the United States has provided the foundation for its security. A second tier is the close alliance with fellow Arab Gulf states through the GCC, within which Kuwait is increasingly acting as a mediator. As U.S.-Iranian relations have improved with the implementation of the nuclear agreement, so have Kuwaiti-Iranian relations.

Unlike most other Arab countries, there continues to be strong popular support for Kuwait's alliance with the United States and the United Kingdom because of their role in liberating the emirate from Iraqi occupation in 1991. U.S. troops continue to be based in the emirate, providing support to Theater Support Cooperation Plans and multilateral exercises.

Kuwait's concerns about the threat of conflict spilling over from Iraq has prompted improved border security. ISIS social media has become increasingly critical of Kuwait's role in hosting Western troops in support of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, blaming it for "the humiliation and subjugation of the righteous ones." Kuwaiti authorities work diligently to prevent the return of Kuwaiti-born foreign fighters who have joined the ISIS and other jihadist movements, as a campaign against government targets, Western forces, and Kuwait's Shi'a population (30 percent) would certainly follow.

#### **Qatar**

Qatar is a small oil and gas-rich peninsular Arab sheikhdom that extends from Saudi Arabia into the Gulf. It has been a key strategic ally for the United States since 1992 when the two countries signed a comprehensive Defense Cooperation Agreement. Qatar, a GCC member, also has signed defense pacts with the United Kingdom and France.

Qatar's immense hydrocarbon reserves and foreign investments have allowed Qatari citizens to attain one of the highest per capita GDPs in the world. However, only about 12% of Qatar's inhabitants are indigenous Qatari.

Qatar's foreign policy is complex. Doha is an important U.S. ally, but also actively opposes U.S. policies with which it disagrees. For example, Qatar has provided varying degrees of support to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, the Taliban, Syrian rebels (to include hosting U.S. training of those groups), and Hezbollah.

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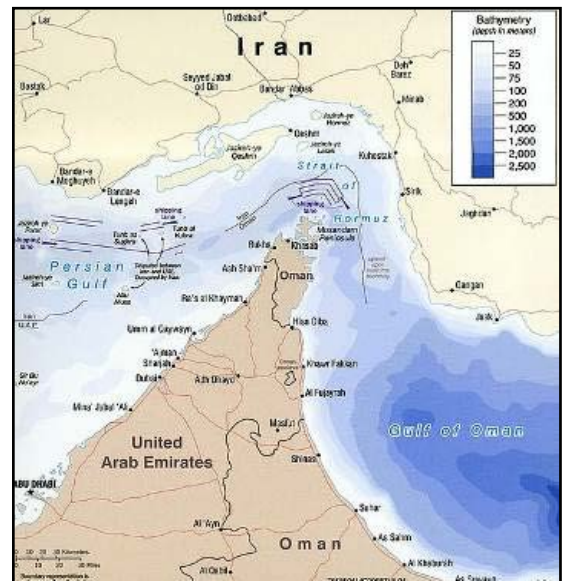
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Today, Qatari-Iranian relations are at a new low, as Iranian accusations of Qatari support to ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups have become more vehement. Qatar has historically relied on Iranian cooperation to develop massive underwater oil and gas fields in the Arabian Gulf, as both countries share the North Field/South Pars reserves. Should Iran demand a greater share of revenue from the shared natural gas fields or encroach upon Qatari waters, Qatar would not be able to defend itself without assistance from the United States, the United Kingdom, or France. Some fear that Qatar's close relations with Washington and its hosting of U.S. military assets make it vulnerable to a backlash against Western military presence in the region.

#### United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven Gulf Arab emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Fujairah and Ras al-Khaimah. Abu Dhabi, the dominant and largest emirate, possesses most of the country's hydrocarbon reserves while Dubai has emerged as an important regional trade and tourism center. The UAE's economy is highly dependent on oil and natural gas exports, and the government aggressively pursues new sources to sustain its economy. In July 2012, a pipeline to Fujairah on the Arabian Sea became operational, allowing the UAE to continue to supply up to 1.5 million barrels of oil per day to the Fujairah refinery and to Fujairah's export terminal.

Like most of its Arab neighbors, the UAE is deeply concerned with Iran's growing economic power, military recapitalization, and uncertainty over Iran's nuclear program. Wary of Iran's regional ambitions, the UAE has sought U.S. guarantees that the JCPOA will not lead United States to diminish its commitment to Abu Dhabi's security. The UAE is a major U.S. partner for Persian Gulf security, and the United States supplies the majority of its defense contracts. The UAE's armed forces are well trained and equipped, with one of the best air forces in the Middle East. During the 2010s, the UAE gained valuable combat experience by conducting airstrikes in Libya, joining the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, and fighting in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.



The UAE remains in dispute with Iran over the islands of Abu Musa (occupied by Iran since 1971), Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb in the Arabian Gulf. Abu Musa's position on the Strait of Hormuz adds to its strategic significance, as it could allow a country to influence the Arabian Gulf's valuable shipping lanes or even close the Gulf altogether. The UAE has urged Iran to take the dispute over the islands to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Iran's response is that its sovereignty over the islands is not negotiable – although it will engage in bilateral talks to clear up misunderstandings. In early 2026, new exploration techniques revealed large oil reserves west of Abu Musa, and Iran announced it would begin drilling within a year.

In spite of these differences, trade between the UAE and Iran has grown significantly since the lifting of sanctions. Over 400,000 Iranians live in the UAE, mainly in Dubai. UAE officials are

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wary of this contingent becoming a “fifth column” and capable of threatening the federation's internal stability. Abu Dhabi favors a harder line against Iran than Dubai, and its power over the federation has increased in recent years due to its financial assistance to the smaller emirates.

#### **Bahrain**

Bahrain's Sunni elite have ruled over a large Shi'a majority since the 18th century, when the Khalifa dynasty overran the island's Persian garrison. In early 2011, Saudi Arabian and UAE forces briefly deployed to Bahrain on behalf of the GCC to suppress Arab-Spring inspired protests. Since that time, the government has resorted to frequent crackdowns to contain Shi'a opposition groups. While aggressive security intervention has reduced the frequency of mass protests involving thousands of individuals, violent protests are almost a daily occurrence across Shi'a villages in the northern governorate and areas like Sitra.

Ongoing violence strengthens hardliners on both sides of the sectarian divide, perpetuating the conflict and increasing Bahrain's dependence on Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, concerned of emboldening its own domestic Shi'a population, ensures Bahrain's government refrains from granting greater political rights to its Shi'a citizens. Bahrain, as the smallest, least wealthy and militarily weakest member of the GCC, has tilted strongly towards Saudi Arabia and the United States for protection. Relations with Iran are extremely volatile, and it frequently accuses Tehran of smuggling weapons to and fomenting unrest within its Shi'a population. Additionally, there is a growing risk that Sunni jihadists, including ISIS, will seek to capitalize on sectarian divisions.

Manama is ultimately reliant on international alliances to guarantee Bahrain's security. Accordingly, it continues to offer generous basing rights for the United States and its allies. U.S. Foreign Military Sales to Bahrain include the F-16 C/D and AIM-120 air-to-air missile, an Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigate, the army tactical missile system, and an AN/TPS-59 (V3) long-range air surveillance radar. Bahraini armed forces are small but well trained, suitably equipped and highly motivated. They could likely defend against an attack for up to 48 hours until treaty-obligated reinforcements would be expected to arrive.

#### **Oman**

The Sultanate of Oman's northernmost enclave is located on the Musandam Peninsula, separated from the rest of Oman by the UAE and overlooking the Strait of Hormuz. Although it maintains long-standing military and political ties to the United Kingdom and the United States, Oman follows an independent foreign policy. Oman's decision to stay out of the 2015 Yemen intervention, for instance, strained its relationship with GCC partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Oman, which has a long history of friendly ties with Iran, played an important mediation role in the negotiations that led to the JCPOA.

Oman's small but effective armed forces are sufficient to deter aggression from foreign powers. Oman allows the United States to base forces at Thumrait, Masirah, Seeb, and Al-Musana'a. The bases maintain a low profile in order to avoid popular unrest. The sultanate, as a member of the GCC, has been a supporter of mutual defense arrangements with other GCC states.

However, Oman also maintains a long tradition of cooperation with Iran, its neighbor across the Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the world's oil passes. Oman concluded security agreements with Iran in 2009, and in 2010, the two countries signed an agreement on mutual

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defense cooperation, and their navies have carried out joint search and rescue exercises. In the event of war, Iran would probably avoid substantial Omani civilian casualties and preserve its negotiation channels with the United States through the Omani government.

In recent years, Oman and India have increased the frequency and scope of their joint exercises by taking advantage of state of the art facilities at the new port of Duqm on the Arabian Sea.

#### **Yemen**

Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world and has a complex history of political, tribal, and religious division. The Zaidi (Shi'a) are mainly located in northwest Yemen and constitute slightly less than half the population, while the Shafi (Sunni) community predominates in the south. Longtime grievances between the two groups have been magnified by conversions to Salafism on both sides. Direct state control over rural Yemen has always been weak with clans, tribes, and tribal confederations often acting as autonomous sub-states.

In early 2015, an alliance between the Houthis and forces loyal to former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh (in office from 1990 to 2012) seized power from the Saudi-Arabian backed government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Fearing the installation of an Iranian proxy government on its southern border and astride the strategic Bab-al Mandeb strait, Saudi Arabia led a coalition that established its seat of government, under President Hadi, in Aden. Attempts to reconcile the Houthi resistance, which still controls Sana'a and most of northern Yemen, with Aden have consistently failed and Houthi forces continue to launch missile attacks and raids against Saudi Arabian forces along the northern border. In the south, the Yemeni government struggles to protect key infrastructure (ports, airports, desalinization plants, and natural gas facilities) against AQAP and ISIS attacks. The Yemeni Armed Forces are primarily responsible for internal security. Pro-government forces are hard-pressed to defend against attacks from al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS, who compete for influence, legitimacy, and recruits among tribal populations. Historically, AQAP enjoyed widespread sympathy due to its historic roots in the Hadhramaut region along Yemen's southern coast, but the brutal tactics and effective messaging of ISIS have either coerced or convinced many locals to shift their support.

The island of Socotra and Yemen's south-central coast have emerged as refueling hubs for pirates and as distribution points for weapons – most of which are shipped to Somali pirates or various Somali armed factions. Although Yemeni-based pirates have stayed “below the radar” by focusing on petty robberies of fishing craft and smuggling illegal arms and narcotics into the Horn of Africa, commercial shipping and tanker traffic would become vulnerable if international naval task force elements were redeployed to other crises.

#### **Israel**

Ever since declaring independence in 1948, Israel has faced multiple threats to its security. It has fought six wars with its Arab neighbors, and since the 1980s has faced the threat of terrorist attack from Hezbollah and Palestinian militants. Despite political turmoil among its neighbors, Israel's peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) have remained intact. However, Hezbollah's entrenchment in Lebanon and instability along its border with Syria present major threats to Israeli security. Israel periodically conducts airstrikes on Hezbollah in Lebanon and joint operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip to manage the militant threat.

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Israel vehemently opposes the U.S.-negotiated JCPOA. Most Israelis see Iran, due to its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, as their nation's primary strategic concern. Israel insists Iran has acquired up to a dozen nuclear warheads from North Korea, and that Tehran remains committed to a rapid and full restoration of its enrichment program following the expiration of the JCPOA in 2030. Nevertheless, U.S.-Israeli ties remain strong, with Israel remaining the top recipient of U.S. foreign aid. Israel received its first F-35 Joint Strike Fighters from the United States in 2016, and two squadrons are now operational.

#### **Egypt**

Egypt ultimately recovered from the political and economic upheavals that began in 2011. However, continued foreign aid and investment, particularly in large infrastructure projects and the development of offshore natural gas fields, will be necessary to grow the economy and maintain loyalty to the government among the Egyptian populace.

The army remains the country's most stabilizing force. It is continuously challenged by the need to secure its border with Libya against jihadists and weapons smuggling, a persistent Islamist insurgency in the Sinai that now includes forces loyal to ISIS, and the need to cooperate with Israel in managing the militant threat from Gaza. Restrictions on movement that Egypt has placed on the Gaza Strip, including the establishment of a buffer zone along the border in 2014, have fostered an antagonistic relationship between Cairo and Hamas. While a Multinational Force and observers group of approximately 1700 members monitors the Sinai, its mission is to confirm the demilitarization of the territory, not to provide security. Therefore, Israel has tacitly agreed to additional Egyptian force deployments in the Sinai to combat their common threat.

Egypt's foreign policy tends to align with those of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE, who share Cairo's antipathy toward the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2015, Egypt joined the Saudi-led military operation against the Houthis in Yemen, primarily by providing maritime security in the Red Sea. Egypt's commitment to its treaty with Israel has also helped secure foreign aid.

Egypt's dependence on the Nile River grows as its population increases. However, the other nine upstream states, signatories to a 1959 treaty on water sharing, also need more water for hydroelectric power and irrigation. While under increased pressure to reapportion the Nile waters, Cairo flatly refuses to sign any water-sharing agreement that is not in its best interests.

#### **Pakistan**

Pakistan's foreign policy is predicated on countering India's regional influence. While the risk of a full-scale military confrontation with India remains low due to the fact that both countries are nuclear powers, Pakistan traditionally has favored a weak Afghanistan to provide strategic depth in the event of overt conflict. Consequently, Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban has fostered deep mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul.

A wide array of Islamic extremist groups operate in Pakistan, including the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), which is opposed Islamabad and takes advantage of safe havens in neighboring Afghanistan. An increasing number of splinter groups from the TTP have pledged allegiance to ISIS, which has grown increasingly capable and entrenched.

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Pakistan's key external relationship is with China, counted as a vital ally since the 1970s. Valued for its international backing, Beijing is a useful counterweight to India, and counter-balances U.S. influence. In addition to arms purchases, significant Chinese investment and development projects have included a new port at Gwadar, the development of the Chashma nuclear power plant, agricultural technology, transport systems, and a number of export-oriented industries. Construction on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a \$46B investment deal announced in 2015, progresses but is over budget and behind schedule due to insecurity on its northern and southern ends, accusations of corruption, and domestic political battles over contract awards.



Beginning in 2011, Pakistan reduced its dependence on the United States and Pakistani politicians increasingly viewed engagement with the U.S. government as a liability. U.S. lawmakers continue to express great concern over the lack of accountability of Pakistan's intelligence agencies to their federal government and have never forgotten A.Q. Khan's provision of nuclear weapons technology to North Korea.

#### Afghanistan

Kabul continues to depend on foreign aid as it seeks to secure centers of government, attract foreign investment, and develop democratic institutions and the economy. Ethnic Pashtuns (40% of the population) remain hostile to the unity government and sympathetic to the Taliban, which continues to use Pakistan as a safe haven and channel of supply. The Taliban also receives support from Qatar, which hosts a Taliban diplomatic mission in Doha.

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), backed by NATO air support and a residual training mission, launch periodic attacks against the Taliban but cannot secure and hold Afghan provincial areas. Fewer than 10,000 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan to train and advise Afghan Forces and support counterterrorism operations against ISIS and the remnants of Al Qaeda. ISIS has capitalized on the Taliban's inability to decisively defeat the unity government and oust foreign troops, and now attracts significant numbers of local and foreign fighters.

Instability in Afghanistan remains one of the primary obstacles for foreign investment. Opium production in Taliban-controlled areas has soared, aggravating corruption on both sides of the border. The drug is primarily exported via illicit networks to Pakistani ports, Central Asia (for consumption in Russia and Europe), and – to a far lesser extent – Iran.

#### Central Asia

Three decades after they formally freed themselves of Moscow's dominance, most Central Asian economies remain inextricably tied to Russia. Kazakhstan is bound to Russia by a customs

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union, while the region's two poorest countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are both deeply dependent on migrant remittances. Additionally, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan belong to the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO. CSTO, a Russian-dominated military alliance that some say has evolved as a counter to NATO, holds annual military exercises that have traditionally emphasized anti-terrorism missions.

Turkmenistan – which exports natural gas westward via the Trans-Caspian pipeline, north to Russia, east to China (via northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan), and southward to Iran – walks a careful tightrope in balancing competing foreign interests. Uzbekistan continues to use threats from extremist groups, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), as a justification for its oppressive domestic policies. Uzbekistan frequently has strained relations with most of its immediate neighbors and looks to Russia for its greatest source of external support.